

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre

Jin Yong

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Chapter 1 - Pondering on the Gentleman Far Far Away

Translated by Athena



She heard that the music was mixed by the singing of birds and it seemed that the birds were singing along. Guo Xiang thought: "According to mother there is a song called "Empty Mountain and Songs of Birds." But this song was lost for many ages, is it possible this is that song?"

*The vast and mighty tour through Spring,
is every year's winter yearning.
The season of the pear blossom is nearing.*

The white jade brocade is without wrinkles and smells fragrantly and is mesmerizing.

*Snow is piling up on jade trees and jade petals.
The quiet night is deep.*

*The floating brightness is concealed through the clouds.
A cold steep is enough to melt the moon.
A dark silver fog illuminates heaven and earth.*

Her simple, natural but enchanting appearances mesmerizes me.

Even greater were her will and spirit.

She is like a bloom that exceeds other beautiful and fragrant flowers.

Her noble spirit is clear and pure, her immortal ability lies high.

She returns to the Jade palace and I can only see her from afar.

The author of this poem, Free from Mediocrity, is a famous martial arts expert from the southern Song dynasty. The name of this expert was Qiu Chu Ji, also known as the Everlasting One. He is one of the 7 Masters of QuanZhen, and one of the most outstanding disciples of the QuanZhen School. Qiu Chuji wrote this poem after he met Xiao LongNu for the first time. She was a neighbour of Qiu for many years.

At this time Qiu Chuji already passed away, and Xiao LongNu is the wife of the famous Condor Hero Yang Guo. Another girl was reciting this poem softly, in HeNan province and on Mount ShaoShi. This young girl was about 18, 19 years old and was wearing a cream yellow robe, she was riding on a mule and was proceeding up the mountain pass. She was thinking: "Only someone like sister Long is fit for him." "Him" of course refers to Yang Guo.

After some time she softly recited: "Union is bliss, parting is woe, Agony is boundless for a lovelorn. Sweet heart, give me word....

Trails of clouds drifting forward, Amid mountains cupped with snow, Whither shall my lonesome shadow go?"

This girl carried a short sword and looked travel stained. She is a beautiful young girl who is supposed to be happy and untroubled but somehow, she looks unhappy, melancholic.

Her name is Guo Xiang, is the second daughter of the Great Hero Guo Jing and the famous Huang Rong. Her nickname is Little Eastern Heretic. With her mule and sword she has traveled a lot, her purpose was to forget her worries but her travelling only increased her sorrow.

Mount ShaoShi of HeNan province were a set of large stone steps, these steps were constructed under the order of Emperor GaoZong of the Tang dynasty. It looked very impressive as Guo Xiang proceeded up the mountain. Before long she could see the monastery.

She stared at the roof for a moment and and thought: "The ShaoLin Monastery is said to be the origin of martial arts, but why aren't there any ShaoLin experts among the 5 Greats? Is it because the ShaoLin experts knew there weren't a match

for the other experts and were afraid to disgrace ShaoLin and refused to go? Or was it because the monks had evolved beyond earthly matters and didn't want to scramble for power and fame.

After a while she saw a large stone tablet, half of it was gone and the characters were unclear, Guo Xiang was thinking: "How come characters carved into stone can fade away through time, but my feelings carved in my heart become more and more stronger as time goes by."

This tablet was bestowed by Emperor TaiZong of the Tang dynasty. He praised the ShaoLin monks for helping him suppress the rebellions. The tablet states the military credits of the ShaoLin monks for helping Emperor TaiZong defeat the rebel general Wang ShiChong, of which 13 monks were most famous. Only one monk became a general and the other 12 didn't want to become officials and Emperor TaiZong bestowed 12 purple kasayas. Guo Xiang was thinking: "During the Sui and Tang Dynasty, the ShaoLin Monastery was already very famous for its martial arts, and now after a few hundred years they must be even more formidable."

When Guo Xiang parted with Yang Guo and Xiao LongNu at Mount Hua 3 years ago. She lost all contact with them and missed them a lot. So she told her parents that she wanted to roam a bit but in fact, she wanted to hear some news about Yang Guo. She doesn't want to actually meet them, she is very content if she can hear something about them. However, they seem to have disappeared entirely, Guo Xiang has traveled from north to south and from west to east. She practically traveled through China but still there was no news on Yang Guo.

She remembered that Yang Guo asked reverend WuSe to bring her a present on her 16th birthday. WuSe was a friend

of Yang Guo and instructed someone to deliver Guo Xiang a present. Although she has never met him, she wants to know if he has any news about Yang Guo.

She was pensive for some time till she heard some metallic noise and a voice chanting Buddhist scriptures: "Through love worry will arise. Through love fear will arise. If you can free yourself from love, all worries and fear will be gone."

When Guo Xiang heard this, she was completely dazzled. And softly repeated those words. The metallic noise and the chanting were becoming distant.

Guo Xiang said: "I must ask him, how I can free myself from love and how my worries and fear will disappear." She tied her mule to a tree and chased after the sound. Guo Xiang caught with the monk and was shocked to see the monk carrying two large iron buckets and he was chained on his hands, feet, and neck, causing him to produce a metallic sound as he walked. The buckets were filled with water and it showed that the monk must possess extraordinary strength.

Guo Xiang spoke to the monk: "I have a few questions, please stop for awhile."

The monk turned around and both Guo Xiang and the monk were surprised to see each other. The monk was JueYuan. 3 years ago Guo Xiang met him on Mount Hua. Guo Xiang also knew that this monk was really pedantic, but had extremely powerful internal energy not inferior to any top martial arts expert of this time. She spoke to him: "Oh, it is you reverend JueYuan. What happened to you?" JueYuan smiled and nodded but didn't speak. He turned around and walked away again. Guo Xiang said: "It's me, Guo Xiang. Don't you recognize me anymore?"

Jue Yuan turned his head and smiled and nodded but didn't stop. Guo Xiang asked: "Who chained you? Why do they torture you?" Jue Yuan raised his left hand and shook his hand in admonition, meaning do not ask.

Guo Xiang wouldn't let this matter rest until she got to the bottom of this. And wanted to run in front of JueYuan but was not successful. Although JueYuan was carrying 2 large buckets of water he was still very quick. Guo Xiang was amused and leapt up and wanted to grab one of the buckets, but she missed by an inch.

Guo Xiang said: "You have very impressive abilities, but I must catch up with you."

JueYuan continued to walk and the metallic noise sounded rather melodic. Guo Xiang was having difficulty keeping up and she was really impressed: "Both my father and mother praised this monk for his superior martial arts, at that time I wasn't totally convinced, but now I know they were right."

After awhile, JueYuan walked to the back of a small house and emptied the buckets of water in an old well. Guo Xiang asked: "What are you doing? Why are you emptying the water in this well?" JueYuan remained calm and shook his head. Guo Xiang thought she understood now and smiled: "You're learning some sort of powerful martial arts, aren't you?" JueYuan shook his head again. Guo Xiang was feeling a bit angry now and said: "I just heard you chanting, you're not dumb, why won't you answer me?" JueYuan put his palms together and looked apologetic and carried the buckets and walked away again.

Guo Xiang looked into the well and couldn't find anything strange about it and stared at JueYuan's back and felt puzzled.

She gave chase for awhile but soon she felt tired and rested on a rock. She was admiring the scenery and felt very fresh afterwards. Guo Xiang was thinking: "I wonder where the pupil of this monk is. The pupil will probably tell me what is going here."

She started going down again and wanted to find Zhang JunBao, the pupil of JueYuan. She walked for awhile and soon she heard that metallic sound again, Jue Yuan came up again and Guo Xiang quickly hid and thought: "I'll spy on him and see what he is up to."

The metallic sound was becoming clearer and she saw JueYuan reading a book. She silently approached him and called out: "What are you reading?"

JueYuan was startled and cried out: "You gave me a scare, it's only you." Guo Xiang smiled: "You're not pretending to be a dumb anymore." JueYuan looked slightly afraid and looked to the left and right and shook his hand.

Guo Xiang asked: "What is wrong?"

Before JueYuan could answer, 2 monks in grey robes appeared out of the woods. One was very tall, the other one short. The tall monk sternly said to JueYuan: "JueYuan, you broke the rules by talking to an outsider and furthermore to a young girl. Come with us to see the elder of the Disciplinary Hall."

JueYuan looked crestfallen and nodded and started walking behind those 2 monks. Guo Xiang was angry and annoyed and sternly reproached: "What kind of rule forbids people from talking? I know this reverend and if I want to talk to him, it's no concern to you."

The tall monk gave her an arrogant look and said: "For more than thousand years, the ShaoLin Monastery doesn't allow women to enter. I suggest that Miss would leave before you get yourself in trouble."

Guo Xiang became even more angry and said: "So what about women? Aren't women humans? And why do you pester reverend JueYuan? How come he is chained and you forbid him to talk to anyone?"

The monk coldly replied: "These are the rules of our monastery, no one has the right to question, not even the emperor. Miss, needn't bother."

Guo Xiang angrily said: "Reverend JueYuan is an honest good person, you're bullying him because he's a nice man. Where are reverend TianMing, the monks WuSe and WuXiang?"

The 2 monks were shocked. Reverend TianMing is the abbot of ShaoLin, WuSe is the elder of the LuoHan Hall and WuXiang is the elder of the DaMo Hall. The 3 of them are very respected, all the monks address them as 'old abbot, elder of the LuoHan Hall or elder of the DaMo Hall.'

No one has dared to call out their names, and today these 2 monks hear this young girl calling out their names and creating a scene.

These 2 monks are the pupils of the elder of the Disciplinary Hall, and received orders to keep an eye on JueYuan. But now they see Guo Xiang interfering, the tall monk yelled: "If you don't leave now, we will not be friendly."

Guo Xiang said: "Should I be afraid of you? Hurry up and free JueYuan of his chains or else I will go to old monk TianMing."

The short monk became angry now and saw Guo Xiangs' sword. He said: "Leave your weapon behind and we will not take actions against you. Leave now!"

Guo Xiang removed her sword and held them in her hands and scoffed: "Alright then, I will comply."

The short monk grew up in the ShaoLin monastery and heard his seniors say that ShaoLin was the origin of all martial arts and no matter how respected or how skilled, martial arts experts never carried weapons to the ShaoLin monastery. Although this young girl didn't actually reach the monastery but she was already on ShaoLin premises. He thought this young girl was afraid and presented her sword so he reached out to grab the sword. However, when his fingers touched the scabbard his felt a painful tingling, like being struck by lightning. He felt a strong force coming from the sword and pushing him backward. He couldn't maintain his stand and fell down. As he was standing on a slope he soon rolled down a few metres. With some difficulty, he could stop himself from rolling anymore.

The tall monk was shocked and angry and yelled out: "Of all the nerves! How dare you come to ShaoLin to wreak havoc!" He turned his body and advanced one step in front and his right fist aimed at Guo Xiang. His left hand was put on the back of the fist causing two palms striking down. This was the 28th technique of "Dashing ShaoLin" namely "Turning Over Split"

Guo Xiang held on to her sword and pressed down her sword with scabbard and all to the monks' shoulder. The monk held on to the sword.

JueYuan was very frantic and called out: "Stop! Don't fight!"

The monk tried to pull the sword over, suddenly he felt a shock through his palm and both arms felt numb he cried: "No!" Guo Xiang swept her left leg and kicked him down the slope. He was somewhat more injured than the other monk, his face was bleeding.

Guo Xiang was thinking: "I came to ShaoLin to find some information on brother Yang, but now I'm engaged in a fight for no apparent reason."

She saw JueYuan looking sad, she pulled out her sword and cut the chains. JueYuan was screaming: "No, you musn't!" for a few times. Guo Xiang cut three chains and said: "Those 2 wicked monks will go back for reinforcements. We must go now, where is your little disciple?" JueYuan kept shaking his hands. Suddenly a voice came from behind saying: "Thank you for caring Miss Guo, I'm right here."

Guo Xiang turned around and saw a 16, 17 year old man standing there. He had thick eyebrows and big eyes and was very tall. But still looked very young. She met him 3 years ago at Mount Hua, he was Zhang JunBao. He was taller this time compared to three years ago but he very much looked the same. Guo Xiang was very pleased and said: "Those nasty monks were bullying your teacher, we must go now." JueYuan laughed wryly and shook his head and suggested that Guo Xiang should quickly leave now before trouble comes.

Guo Xiang knows that there were an uncountable amount of ShaoLin experts that were superior to her, but seeing this situation she couldn't leave this matter alone and she was worried that ShaoLin experts would stop them. So she pulled JueYuan in one hand and the other Zhang JunBao and told them: "Hurry up, we'll discuss everything when we leave this

place." But the two of them just stood still.

At this time 7, 8 monks with wooden rods came up the slope and yelled: "Who is that audacious girl? How dare she come to ShaoLin and behave atrociously!" Zhang JunBao called out: "Please don't be rude, this is....."

Guo Xiang hurriedly said: "Don't say my name." She knew that she created a big scene today and perhaps this might even escalate so she didn't want to drag her parents into this. She added: "Let's go the other way! Don't mention my parents' name.

But another 7, 8 monks came towards them. Guo Xiang saw that they were surrounded and raised her elegant eyebrows and said to JueYuan and Zhang: "The both of you are so fussy, you lack a hero spirit! Do you want to leave now?" Zhang JunBao said: "Master, Miss Guo has only good intentions..."

At this point 4 monks came up the slope, although they didn't carry weapons but judging their body posture they were experts.

Guo Xiang knew that using force would be futile so she just stood still and waited to see what would happen.

The first monk walked up and spoke to Guo Xiang: "The elder of the LuoHan Hall ordered that the intruder was to lay down her weapon and was to be taken to the YiWei pavilion for questioning."

Guo Xiang scoffed: "The monks of ShaoLin have mastered the air of government officials. All of you speak a bureaucratic tone! I'm wondering whether you're officials to the Song emperor or officials to the Mongolian emperor?"

At this time, the entire northern territories of China were in hands of the Mongolians, the ShaoLin monastery fell under Mongolian jurisdiction. However, the Mongolians were busy deploying their troops so they had no time to control any temples, monasteries. Everything in ShaoLin remained the same.

The monk felt embarrassed by Guo Xiang's remarks and his face turned red and he felt that giving orders to outsiders was not very appropriate. He put his palms together and said: "May I inquire what business you have here, Benefactress. Would you please lay down your weapon and go to the YiWei pavilion where tea will be served and we have some questions we would like to ask."

Guo Xiang heard his tone became a bit more friendly and thought this would be a good chance to stop and said: "I don't care if you let me enter or not. It's not like ShaoLin has any treasure and I'm not willing to benefit from it." She turns to Zhang JunBao and quietly asked: "Are coming or not?" Zhang JunBao shook his head and looked at his teacher saying his place is here. Guo Xiang loudly said: "Alright then, I will not interfere. I'm off," and started walking down the slope. The first monk moved away but 2 other monks blocked her. And said: "Lay down you sword!" Guo Xiang raised her eyebrows and put her hand on the hilt. The first monk explained: "We don't want to keep your weapon, we will return it when you leave Mount ShaoShi. This is our rule, please forgive us."

Guo Xiang heard his tone was polite and thought: "If I don't leave my sword, there is bound to be a fight and alone I'm no match for these monks. But if I leave my sword, I will disgrace my parents, brother Yang, sister Long and my grandfather."

She was still thinking, and suddenly a figure appeared in front of her and shouted: "You come here with a weapon, injured 2 of our disciples. What's the meaning of this?" And he formed a claw and grabbed Guo Xiang's sword. If this monk didn't use force, Guo Xiang would surely hand over her sword after some consideration. She isn't like her elder sister Guo Fu. Although she is straightforward, she is not rash. Seeing this disadvantage, she would have complied and discussed this matter with her parents and Huang YaoShi and come back for an explanation. But now this monk used force, how can she watch her sword being grabbed away?

The monk's grip was firm and he held on to the scabbard. He wanted to quickly disarm her. Because it would not be proper for a monk to be pulling and pushing with a pretty young girl. Guo Xiang couldn't hold on to the scabbard and pulled out her sword. The monk used his right hand to seize the scabbard but his 2 fingers on his left hand were cut off.

The other monks were angry when they saw their martial arts brother wounded and picked up their wooden rods, cudgels and attacked. Guo Xiang knew that she had no choice but to fight now and used "Descending Flower Swordsmanship" to defend herself.

The Descending Flower Swordsmanship was derived from Huang YaoShi's Divine Descending Flower Sword Palms. Although this swordsmanship is not as refined and excellent as the "Jade Flute Swordsmanship", it was still a special technique from the Peach Blossom Island. The monks saw green flashes surging, the sword dancing, making it seem like flowers descending. In a few moments, 2 monks were injured. But other monks took their places and soon Guo Xiang was completely surrounded. She would've been overwhelmed if not for the fact that the monks were benevolent and not willing to harm her life. All their stances

were to immobilize her and not to kill her, so they would lecture her and escort her away from here. Also, all the monks saw that this young girl had learnt superior martial arts and they thought that she must be either the daughter of famous martial arts experts or at least the disciple of a skilled martial arts expert. So they didn't want to make any enemies, so every stance was rather limited. Some monks went to notify the elder of the LuoHan Hall.

In the heat of the battle, an old tall monk came and observed the fight with a smile on his face. Two monks approached him and told him something.

Guo Xiang was panting and her swordsmanship was becoming disorderly and she yelled out: "What origin of martial arts? 10 monks surrounding one person, what a way to win?"

That old monk was the elder of the LuoHan Hall, reverend WuSe, when he heard this he said: "Stand back everyone!"

All the monks jumped away. Reverend WuSe asked: "What is your name, Miss? And who is your father and teacher? What business do you have here at ShaoLin?"

Guo Xiang was thinking: "I can't tell him my name. And I cannot reveal my reason in front of so many people. If my parents and brother Yang found out the mess I created they will be upset, the best thing to do is sneak away." She answered: "I can't tell you my name, I just came here to enjoy the scenery. I never guessed that the ShaoLin Monastery was even stricter than the imperial palace, with no reason your weapon will be confiscated. I would like to ask, did I enter the monastery? When Master DaMo taught ShaoLin martial arts he just wanted the monks to improve their conditions and concentrate on their meditation through

martial arts. But when ShaoLin became more and more famous, and their martial arts kept improving, now the ShaoLin monks rely on martial arts to flaunt their superiority. Well you can have my sword, and if you don't kill me, everyone in the realm of martial arts will know what happened today."

Guo Xiang is famous for being clever and fluent, this entire matter was actually her fault but with those words she rendered reverend WuSe speechless. She thought: "I don't want anyone to know about this, and it seems that ShaoLin doesn't want the outside world to know about this incident either. A group of 10 monks attacking a young girl will not do their reputation any good."

She threw her sword on the ground and started walking away. Reverend WuSe walked up and used his sleeve to pick the sword and said: "Miss, I will return your sword and see you off respectfully."

Guo Xiang smiled sweetly and said: "It seems that you're very reasonable. That's more like it. That's the style a martial arts expert should have."

Seeming that she won, Guo Xiang just praised this old monk and reached out to get her sword back. When she wanted to pull back, she noticed it didn't move an inch. She used strength 3 times but in vain, and she said: "You're deliberately displaying your martial arts." Suddenly her left hand curled up and softly wanted to brush against WuSe's two left cheek acupoints, namely 'TianDing and JuGu.' WuSe moved away and released his grip. Guo Xiang quickly seized her sword.

WuSe said: "Very impressive "Whisking Acupoint Orchid Hand." May I ask how you address the lord of the Peach

Blossom Island?"

Guo Xiang laughed: "The lord of the Peach Blossom Island? I call him old Eastern Heretic."

Huang YaoShi is her maternal grandfather. He is a strange, eccentric man and he calls his granddaughter little Eastern Heretic and Guo Xiang calls him old Eastern Heretic. Huang YaoShi is not angry when he hears it and he is even happy when he hears it.

WuSe was a robber in his early years. Although he has studied Zen for many years and has profound Buddhist knowledge, he still is very straightforward, otherwise, he couldn't be friends with Yang Guo. Seeing that this little girl is not willing to tell him, he wants to test her and find out. He smiled and said: "Young Miss, if you can withstand 10 of my stances, I can guess your school."

Guo Xiang asked: "What if you cannot?"

WuSe laughed and said: "Well if you can withstand 10 of my stances, I will have to listen to you."

Guo Xiang pointed at JueYuan and said: "I met this reverend JueYuan some years ago and I want to plead on his behalf. If I can withstand 10 of your stances you have to promise not to give him anymore trouble."

WuSe was surprised, he knew that JueYuan was very pedantic and stayed in the Library and watched over the scriptures and never met any outsiders. How did he meet this young girl? WuSe said: "We never did give him any trouble. He is sitting out his punishment, that is not giving him trouble."

Guo Xiang pouted and scoffed: "It seems to me that you just

want to go back on your word."

WuSe clapped his hands and said: "Very well, if I lose I will carry 3108 buckets of water for JueYuan. Watch out, here I come."

Guo Xiang was thinking when she spoke to him: "This old monk seems to be a true expert. If he starts to attack first, I will have to try my best to defend myself and will reveal my parents' martial arts. The best thing to do is for me to attack first and try to gain the upperhand." When she heard him say "Watch out, here I come." she didn't give him time to attack first and raised her sword and aimed for his chest. This was a technique from the "Descending Flower Swordsmanship" namely "Thousands and Myriads of Purple and Red."

The tip of the sword kept moving, not revealing to the opponent where the sword was aiming for.

Guo Xiang yelled out: "The second stance!" the short sword turned around and came from bottom to top, this was called the "Celestial Gentry Topping Apart" which was a QuanZhen technique.

WuSe said: "Good, QuanZhen sword technique."

Guo Xiang said: "Not necessarily." Her short sword stabbed into the air and saw WuSe using an attack as a defense and using his fingers to grab her wrist. She was a bit afraid: "This old monk is very formidable, he can attack bare-handed under such a dangerous technique."

Seeing his fingers were coming closer, her sword dazzled a few times and used a technique from the "Dog Beating Stick", namely "Mean Hound Blocking the Road." And this stance belonged to the Sealing Formula.

Guo Xiang was close friends with the deceased leader of the Beggars Association Lu Youjiao, they occasionally drank wine and played mora together. Sometimes Lu would demonstrate his martial arts, although the "Dog Beating Stick" is only permitted to be used and learnt by the leader of the Beggars Association, Guo Xiang could learn a few stances from Lu. Furthermore, her mother Huang Rong and her brother-in-law were leaders of the Beggars Association. So she has seen this style a lot and could trick people into believing that she knew this style although she didn't know the exact secret of it.

WuSe's fingers just reached her wrist but he saw a bright light shining and the blade was coming towards his fingers in an excellently beautiful way. Almost cutting off his five fingers, but luckily his martial arts were high and he could avoid the attack by pacing back 2 steps. But his left sleeve was split. WuSe looked terrified and cold sweat was breaking out.

Guo Xiang was very amused and smiled: "What sword style is this?" In fact this wasn't a sword technique, she just used a stance from the "Dog Beating Stick" and used it as a sword stance. Because this style was magnificent, even Guo Xiang couldn't completely learn it, it was still capable to scare off this martial arts expert of ShaoLin.

Guo Xiang thought: "If I learnt a few more stances from the "Dog Beating Stick" I could easily defeat this old monk.

She didn't give WuSe time to catch his breath and advanced forward. Her sword was slightly raised and she floated towards him. Her posture looked like a floating fairy, the blade was pointing at WuSe's legs. This was called "A Small Orchard for Chrysanthemum" which belonged to the Jade

Maiden Swordsmanship. Guo Xiang learnt this technique from Xiao LongNu.

The Jade Swordsmanship was created by Lin ChaoYing, this style was not only swift and fierce but also refined, elegant and beautiful. All the monks never saw something that beautiful, they were all surprised and pleased. Because ShaoLin sword styles were firm and fierce, for example, LuoHan and DaMo Swordsmanship. This Jade Maiden Swordsmanship was hardly known throughout the world of martial arts, the essence of it is the opposite of ShaoLin styles but when it comes to superiority of the stances, it is not above ShaoLin Swordsmanship.

But this technique was absolutely beautiful and celestial.

Even in Buddhist scriptures it is mentioned: "When the appearances are gracious and charming, when the manner is solemn, gentle and elegant. And behavior proper and gratifying. The watcher will not be bored."

Reverend WuSe was impressed by such a magnificent stance and hoped to see it more clearly so he moved away and waited till Guo Xiang attacked again.

Guo Xiang's technique now was changing directions a few times from east to west and from west to east. Zhang JunBao was mesmerized by it and was surprised to recognize this stance as "Extend in all Directions." 3 years ago Yang Guo taught Zhang JunBao this technique and Guo Xiang was there to see it and now is using it. This was originally a palm technique, now she used it as a sword stance, the power of this stance was not that powerful anymore but it was a very strange sword stance and WuSe was a bit frightened by it.

They reached the fifth stance now, and WuSe didn't have any

idea who she was. In his younger years, he roamed the world and gained a lot of martial arts experience and insight. And now he is the elder of the LuoHan Hall for more than 10 years and has examined all styles of different schools and compared to ShaoLin martial arts. So he was always very confident to recognize the martial arts of any expert within a few stances.

His limit with Guo Xiang of 10 stances was already a very big margin. He never guessed that the parents, relatives, friends of Guo Xiang were all top martial arts experts and she learnt a few stances of each and every one of them, causing WuSe to be confused. WuSe now thought: "The only way for me now is to attack with strength, forcing to use her own martial arts to defend herself. If not, I cannot even guess her school after a hundred stances."

He turned around and used "Double Piercing Hands" and 2 fists aimed for Guo Xiang. She saw that his attack was fierce and didn't dare to block it and twisted her body and glided away from that attack. She remembered when Ying Gu fought against Yang Guo, Ying Gu used this style.

WuSe praised: "Good movement! Try another stance."

His left hand curled up like a flower, bending his left elbow in front of his chest and this was another ShaoLin fist stance.

This stance completely sealed Guo Xiang. She turned around her sword and use the sword as her finger and displayed the "Yi Yang Finger". She learnt this technique from her martial arts brother, Wu XiuWen. And she aimed for 3 of WuSe's acupoint of his wrist. Although she only learned the mere basics of "Yi Yang Finger" this technique of sealing 3 acupoints in one go was one of the key points of "Yi Yang Finger."

Reverend YiDeng's Yi Yang Finger was renowned through the world. WuSe recognized it and quickly changed stance.

However if WuSe didn't change technique, and let Guo Xiang touch his 3 acupoints he would have known that her "Yi Yang Finger" was far from perfect.

But in a fight he wasn't willing to risk his reputation and name for it. Guo Xiang smiled sweetly and said: "You recognize a powerful technique when you see it."

WuSe grunted and used a stance called "Single Phoenix Glaring At the Sun". With this stance WuSe used both hands to knock out Guo Xiangs' sword.

She knew that he wouldn't really harm her but was still frightened and used Zhou BoTong's Kong Ming Fist to counter it. This Kong Ming Fist was quite new to the martial arts realm so WuSe didn't recognize it and turned to another stance namely "Siding to the 7 Stars Flower." One of his palms was up the other down and pressed down on Guo Xiang. If she didn't use internal energy to block it, her hands would be snapped.

Guo Xiang thought: "Do you really want to break my hands?" And used an Iron Palm technique to block this attack. She learned this stance from Wu XiuWen's wife, WanYan Ping. This stance was created by the famous Qiu QianRen and this palm technique was known to be number one for being violent and fierce.

WuSe was shocked to see a young girl using the Iron Palm technique and quickly withdrew his attack. First of all, he didn't want to harm her, second, he was quite afraid for the Iron Palm technique.

Guo Xiang smiled sweetly: "This is the tenth stance, guess what school I belong to?"

And attacked WuSe with a simple ShaoLin Fist called "The Sea of Bitterness has no Bounds." This stance belonged to the LuoHan fist style and WuSe was both angry and amused to see this. And he quickly used another stance to block it and lift her up. This was called "Carry the Mountain and Leap over the Ocean."

But when he did that he realised: "I'm only wanted to win her and cannot recognize her school. She used 10 different stances, what can I say. I surely can't say she belongs to ShaoLin."

Guo Xiang was yelling: "Let me go!" and something dropped out of her clothes. Guo Xiang yelled again: "Let me go, you old monk."

WuSe was an enlightened monk, he believe all creatures were the same. He made no differences in men and women, he even treated animals with care. He said: "I'm old enough to be your grandfather. What are you afraid of?"

He gently flicked his arm and Guo Xiang landed a few metres further.

He was about to admit defeat, when he saw 2 small dark iron figures of 2 Arhats and picked them up.

Guo Xiang asked him: "Well, do you admit defeat?"

WuSe looked very pleased and said: "Why should I admit defeat? Your father is the great hero Guo Jing, your mother is the heroine Huang Rong. Your grandfather is Lord Huang of

the Peach Blossom Island. You're second Miss Guo Xiang. Your father learnt martial arts from the 7 Eccentrics of Jiang Nan, Peach Blossom Island, Northern Beggar and the QuanZhen School. No wonder Miss Guo has such profound knowledge of martial arts."

Guo Xiang was stunned: "This old monk is very formidable, I used 10 different stances but he was still able to know who I was."

WuSe smiled and said: "Miss Guo, I recognized you from these 2 Arhat statues, how is brother Yang?"

Guo Xiang was shocked for a moment and said: "You must be reverend WuSe. You gave me these 2 Arhats as a present to me. The reason I came here was to find out some news of brother Yang and sister Long."

WuSe said: "Many years ago, Master Yang came to our monastery and stayed for a few days. And when he left for XiangYang he asked me to help him. But I don't know where he is now."

It seems that both Guo Xiang and WuSe didn't know where Yang Guo was.

Guo Xiang was stunned for a moment and said: "Not even you know where he is now. I wonder who does know."

Guo Xiang thanked him for his present.

These 2 Arhats were made by a carpenter monk of ShaoLin. These 2 Arhats could display a set of LuoHan fist if you activate the mechanism. That's why Guo Xiang knew that ShaoLin fist.

WuSe laughed and said: "Because of the rules of our monastery I cannot invite you stay, however I will walk you down. Please forgive us."

Guo Xiang was pensive and said: "It doesn't matter, I asked what I came for anyway."

WuSe said: "As for my Buddhist brother JueYuan I will explain later. You know what, we will find a good inn and talk these things over by a good meal and some wine." Reverend WuSe was highly respected by the ShaoLin monks, and they were all puzzled to see him being so respectful towards a young girl.

Guo Xiang said: "No need for that, I'm sorry that injured a few reverends. Please forgive me for being rash. I will leave now and I hope to see you again."

WuSe laughed and said: "I'm adamant, I will see you off. I'm sorry I couldn't attend your 16th birthday that year. After burning down the supplies and the gunpowder of the Mongolian army I left without going to XiangYang.

Guo Xiang knew he had good intentions, and like his straightforward manner and was very eager to make friends with him and said: "Good."

After the 2 of them walked for awhile and passed the Yi Wei pavilion. They heard a footsteps behind them when they turned around to look they saw Zhang JunBao. Guo Xiang smiled and said: "Brother Zhang, did you come to see me off too?"

Zhang JunBao blushed and said: "Yes."

Suddenly another monk ran towards WuSe looking rather

hectic. WuSe frowned his eyebrows and said: "Why are you so frantic?" That monk went to WuSe and said something very quietly. WuSe's face changed and said: "Really?"

The monk said: "The abbot asked master WuSe to return now and to discuss matter."

Guo Xiang saw that WuSe looked worried and told him: "If you have something to do now, feel free to go back. Real friends don't need all those formalities, we can always eat and drink another time."

WuSe looked pleased and said: "No wonder Master Yang speaks highly of you. You're a true heroine, today you've made a friend."

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "You're already friends with brother Yang. That makes you my friend too."

The two parted and WuSe went back.

Guo Xiang continued to walk down, Zhang JunBao didn't dare to walk next to her and kept 5 steps in between them.

Guo Xiang asked: "Why do they punish your teacher?"

Zhang JunBao said: "The rules of the monastery are very strict, if the monks break them they have to be punished."

Guo Xiang asked: "What did your teacher do wrong, he's a very nice man."

Zhang sighed: "It is all because of the Ni Jia Scripture that was lost."

Guo Xiang said: "You mean the scripture that was stolen by

Xiao XiangZi and Yin KeXing."

Zhang said: "Yes, that day at Mount Hua, I searched them and found nothing even with the help of Master Yang. After we left the mountain we couldn't find them anymore. We returned to the monastery and reported it to the abbot. Because that scripture was written by Master DaMo, the elder of the Disciplinary Hall blamed my teacher for not paying better attention to the scriptures and heavily punished him."

Guo Xiang sighed: "This is blaming it on someone else. Why should reverend JueYuan be punished for it. Because of this they ordered your teacher to fill that well and forbade him to speak."

Zhang said: "This is an old punishment of ShaoLin. According to the elders, this punishment can also be seen as good form of self-cultivation."

Guo Xiang laughed: "It seems I'm a busybody." Zhang quickly said: "We will always remember Miss Guo's help and intentions."

Guo Xiang sighed and thought: "But someone has completely forgotten about me."

After awhile they reached the place where Guo Xiang tied her mule and she said: "Brother Zhang, you needn't see me off anymore." Zhang JunBao looked reluctant to part and didn't know what to say to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang took out her 2 Arhats and gave them to Zhang JunBao: "Here take it."

Zhang JunBao didn't take it and said: "I...I.."

Guo Xiang said: "I'm giving it to you, so take it." Zhang JunBao said: "I.....I...."

Guo Xiang put them in his hands and mounted the mule.

Suddenly someone called out: "Miss Guo, please wait."

It was reverend WuSe, Guo Xiang thought: " This old monk was too formal."

WuSe reached Guo Xiang in a few moments and told Zhang JunBao: "Return to the monastery, don't stroll about."

Zhang JunBao said yes and stared at Guo Xiang for short while and quickly left.

WuSe waited till he was gone and took out a note and said: "Miss Guo, do you know who wrote this note?"

Guo Xiang took the note and read it:

"ShaoLin martial arts have been proclaimed to be invincible throughout China for many years. Ten days from now, The 3 Saints of KunLun will see all ShaoLin skills."

The handwriting was very strong. Guo Xiang asked: "Who are these "The 3 Saints of KunLun," they sound very arrogant."

WuSe said: "You don't know them?" Guo Xiang shook her head and said: "No, I don't know them. I have not heard my parents mention this name before."

WuSe said: "That's the strange thing about it." Guo Xiang asked: "What is strange?"

WuSe said: "Miss Guo, we are now friends and I will be honest

with you. Do you know who brought this note?" Guo Xiang answered: "Probably a messenger from The 3 Saints of KunLun."

WuSe said: "If it was, I'm not that surprised. ShaoLin has been the leading martial arts school in WuLin for hundreds of years. So many martial arts experts come here to challenge us, but we always treat our guests with courtesy. And we try to avoid fighting as much as possible, because if we battled every expert who came here for a fight, we wouldn't have time for our cultivation."

Guo Xiang nodded and said: "That's true."

WuSe said: "However, when the experts are here, and if we don't show them some special ability they will not be impressed. The LuoHan Hall is there to welcome these guests with this special treatment."

Guo Xiang laughed and said: "So you're just here for the fights." WuSe smiled with a wry: "Normally WuLin persons, the disciples of the LuoHan Hall can deal with them, I don't need to fight them personally. But today when I saw that Miss Guo's martial arts were out of the ordinary I decided to see for myself."

Guo Xiang smiled: "You have a very high opinion of me."

WuSe said: "Look at me, we're digressing. To tell you the truth, we found this note in the LuoHan Hall in the hands of the Dragon-Subduing Arhat." Guo Xiang was surprised and asked: "Who put it there?" WuSe shook his head and said: "We don't know. There are hundreds of ShaoLin monks in the monastery, if someone sneaked in, someone must have noticed that. And there are 8 disciples standing guard in the LuoHan Hall every day. Someone just found the note and

quickly reported it to the abbot. Everyone found it strange and that's why I was called back so urgently."

Guo Xiang now understood what he was getting it and said: "You think I'm in league with The 3 Saints of KunLun. I'm creating a diversion here while those 3 fellows enter the LuoHan Hall and leave the note."

WuSe said: "After meeting you I found it impossible you would do something like that. But it was very coincidental that with your appearance a note is left behind in the LuoHan Hall. That's why the abbot and my martial arts brother WuXiang wrongly suspected you were involved in this."

Guo Xiang said: "I don't know them, what are you afraid of? Ten days later if they dare to come, just accept the challenge."

WuSe said: "Afraid, of course we're not afraid. I'm reassured now that they are not your friends."

Guo Xiang knew WuSe's intentions were good, he was afraid that The 3 Saints were friends of hers and was afraid that in a fight they might damage their friendship. She said: "If they come here and courteously want to examine martial arts with you that's not a problem. Otherwise, just teach them a lesson. Also the tone of the note was very arrogant, 'see all ShaoLin skills'. Do they really want to see the 72 skills of ShaoLin?"

Suddenly she thought of something and said: "Couldn't it be that there is a traitor amongst you and secretly put the note there?" WuSe said: "We thought of this too, but that was impossible. Because the Arhat statue's hand was almost 10 metres tall. If someone was to jump up there, his art of levitation should be superb. If there was a traitor he wouldn't

have such good martial arts."

Guo Xiang was very puzzled by this entire incident and was very interested to know the outcome of this duel. But she knew she would miss out on this fight because ShaoLin didn't allow women to enter.

WuSe saw she was pensive and thought that she was thinking of a plan to help them and said: "ShaoLin has overcome many obstacles in these 1000 years and is still standing. If "The 3 Saints of KunLun" really want to pick a fight, we will try our best to battle them. Miss Guo, in less than a month, you'll hear whether these "3 Saints of KunLun" have defeated ShaoLin or not."

At this point, he looked very energetic and brave.

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "Don't forget about your cultivation? In less than a month I will await your good news."

She mounted her mule again and smiled to WuSe.

And then she rode off thinking of a plan not to miss out on this battle.

After thinking for awhile: "Perhaps these "3 Saints of KunLun" are just some ordinary WuLin people. And will be easily defeated by the ShaoLin monks, if they only had half the skills of my mother, father, grandfather or brother Yang, this fight will be very interesting."

When she thought of Yang Guo she became melancholic again. These 3 years of searching were in vain. The tomb on Mount ZhongNan was empty, no news in the Valley of No Love, The FengLing Ferry was deserted too. She thought:

"What do I do when I find him? It will only increase my feelings for him and bring extra frustration. He left for a faraway place, that was also good for me. Although I know everything I do is in vain, it can't stop me from thinking about him and trying to find him."

She rode her mule and wandered a bit on Mount ShaoShi and was feeling melancholic.

She heard music sounds, she was surprised to hear someone playing the zither. She learnt the arts of zither, chess, literature and painting from her mother. Although she learnt only the basics, she is intelligent enough to give her own unique perspective on matters. Frequently, she discussed these arts with her mother. She tied her mule to a tree and walked towards the music.

She heard the music was mixed by the singing of birds and it seemed that the birds were singing along. Guo Xiang thought: "According to mother there is a song called "Empty Mountain and Songs of Birds." But this song was lost for many ages, is it possible this is that song?"

The music became more and more interesting. Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "This man can lure birds with his music, this song must be "A Hundred Birds Admiring the Phoenix." And thought if her grandfather was here, both of them could play this song together. Because Huang YaoShi's flute was unequalled at this time.

The music became softer and the birds flew away and suddenly the music stopped. The man sighed and said he couldn't find a soulmate and drew his sword and started carving on the ground.

Guo Xiang thought: "This man is both well versed in artistic

fields and martial arts, let's see how his swordsmanship is."

She saw that this man was drawing a chessboard with his sword and started playing chess (Go) with himself.

Guo Xiang thought: "This man is lonely too and can't find a soulmate either, so he's playing chess with himself."

After awhile she saw that the man trapped himself in the western side of the chessboard and leaving the central open.

Guo Xiang couldn't help herself and spoke: "Why do you take the western borders? While the central plains are open."

The man saw what he did and took the central plains causing a draw. The man laughed and said: "Good, good!" and continued to play and realised that someone was present. He tossed his sword away and said: "Thank you for your help. May I ask who helped me?"

Guo Xiang saw that he had a long face and dark eyes and was quite skinny. He was about 30 years old. She walked towards him and smiled: "I was very much enchanted by your music, Sir. And when I saw that you're losing to yourself I couldn't help pointing out. Please forgive me for my bluntness."

The man was surprised to see a young girl and when he heard her talking about his music, he was very happy and said: "Miss, is a musician too? Would you please play a piece for me?"

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "My mother taught me some basics, compared to your divine music I'm very bad. But since I heard your song it's only natural that I return a song back. But you musn't laugh."

The man said: "I wouldn't dare."

And handed the zither to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang saw that this zither was an antique. She started to play the zither and her playing was not very spectacular but the man was very happy and surprised.

The song was about a hermit and he lived alone on a mountain and felt lonely. Because he didn't have a soulmate he looked sickly but his aspirations will always be very high.

The man heard his feelings in the music of Guo Xiang and was very grateful and when the music stopped, he just stared into the blank.

Guo Xiang gently put the zither on the ground and turned around and left again. Reciting the poem that matched this song:

*Note: I didn't translate the poems, songs in this part. It will take me too much time. Sorry! I found them on another website. They are not my work.

A gentleman is exploring the mountainside
Close to a stream, all alone
Although he is forlorn, although he is unaware
But he is wise, and will never change
And this piece is the gentleman's song:

The day is so short, a hundred years is so long
The earth is so wide, one hundred incarnations approaches
the Tao
An angel releases the reins, one half is as white as snow
The Creator meets the Jade Lady laughing, I wish for the

dragon's embrace

Turning towards Phu Tang, to buy good wine at Bac Bau
Inviting the dragon to riches which I scorn,
That throughout the year beautify only the being.

Guo Xiang roamed the realm for three years now, and encountered many strange incidents. So she forgot all about the man who played the zither and chess. Another 2 days, The 3 Saints of KunLun will challenge ShaoLin. She was thinking of a way to sneak in and watch but couldn't think of anything. She thought: "My mother can think of 18 plans in a blink of an eye. I'm just too stupid and I can't even think of one plan. Never mind, I'll just go to ShaoLin and perhaps they are too busy fighting of the intruders that they forget to stop me from entering."

She ate some rations for the journey and proceeded to ShaoLin. After riding for some time, she saw 3 horses riding towards her. And in short while they passed her and were headed towards ShaoLin. The riders were all men in their fifties and were green robes and weapons hung to the saddles.

Guo Xiang thought: "These 3 men are martial artists and they are carrying weapons. They must be The 3 Saints of KunLun. If I don't hurry up, I'll miss out on a good fight."

She gave her mule a clap and he quickly pursued them. The 3 riders whipped their horses to increase speed. One of the old man turned back and gave a strange look.

Guo Xiang's mule gave chase for a short distance. The 3 horses were out of sight. The mule looked exhausted. Guo Xiang scolded: "Lazy animal! Normally you never listen to me and keep running about. When I need you to run, you can't keep up." She pulled the mule to a small stone pavilion and

gave the mule to rest. After awhile the three riders came back. Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "Could it be that they are really that useless and were defeated in one blow?"

The three riders dismounted, Guo Xiang looked at them and saw that one of them had a cinnabar coloured face. The other had a really red face and looked very friendly. The third one was very tall and skinny and looked very pale, but in his paleness there was a touch of green.

These 3 old men looked very normal except for their strange skin complexion. She was very fascinated and asked: "Could I ask you whether you went to the ShaoLin Monastery or not? Why did you return when you just when up there?" The pale-looking man gave her a stern look, like scolding her for asking questions.

The red-faced man smiled and said: "How did you know we are headed for the monastery?" Guo Xiang said: "If you go up there, you'll go to the ShaoLin Monastery."

The red-faced man nodded and said: "That's true, and Miss where are you going?" Guo Xiang said: "You're going to ShaoLin, and I'm going too."

The pale-faced man said: "ShaoLin doesn't allow women to enter and carrying weapons is also forbidden." He sounded very arrogant, and because of his height he looked over Guo Xiang's head ignoring her completely.

Guo Xiang was annoyed and said: "Well you're carrying weapons too. Or aren't those weapons?"

The pale-faced man coldly said: "How can you compare yourself with us?"

Guo Xiang scoffed: "What about the 3 of you? Are The 3 Saints of KunLun fighting with the old monks of ShaoLin yet? Who won and who lost?"

The 3 old men's faces changed. The red-faced man asked: "Little Miss, how do you know about this incident with The 3 Saints of KunLun?" Guo Xiang said: "Of course I know."

The pale-faced man walked up and sternly said: "What's your name? Whose disciple are you? And what is your business here at ShaoLin?"

Guo Xiang raised her pretty face and said: "Never you mind."

The pale-faced man was hot-tempered and raised his hand to slap her. But he realised that if he did that, he will be bullying a young girl. He swiftly advanced towards Guo Xiang and seized her sword.

Guo Xiang was taken off guard, this never happened before in her life. To be frank, with her martial arts and experience she was not fit to roam the realm on her own. But everyone respected Guo Jing and Huang Rong and knew she was their daughter and Yang Guo spread the word of her 16th birthday and all the unorthodox WuLin person knew her. Even if they dared not to give Guo Jing and Huang Rong face, they would surely respect Yang Guo. Furthermore, she was very pretty and straightforward, she treated everyone equally no matter what social status they had. Although the realm of martial arts was a dangerous place, she always came out fine and without any harm. She never suffered such humiliation in her life and knew she couldn't get her sword back. Because she was not their match yet, but to give up like this was very difficult to accept.

The pale-faced man held the sword between his index finger

and middle finger and coldly said: "I'll keep this sword for awhile. Seeing you have the audacity to be disrespectful towards me, it's clearly that your parents and teachers didn't teach you any manners. If you want them to come and reclaim the sword and I will tell them what happened and advise to pay more attention to you."

Guo Xiang was furious when she heard this, according to this man she was a wild girl with no manners, and thought: "Fine! Not only did you scold me, you also scolded my parents, grandfather. Do you really think you have invincible abilities and you can be that arrogant."

She held her temper and said: "What's your name?"

The pale-faced man grunted and said: "Let me teach you, you should say: Sirs, may I be so bold to ask you what your names are?"

Guo Xiang angrily said: "No, I will say it however I want. If you don't want to tell me, fine. It's not that I'm desperate to know. This sword isn't worth much, and you are bullying a young girl by stealing their possessions. I don't want it anymore."

She turned around and walked out the pavilion.

Suddenly the red-faced man blocked Guo Xiang and smiled: "Young girls shouldn't be that hot-tempered, when you get married you can't throw tantrums like that anymore. Let me tell you, we are 3 martial arts brothers, and we just arrived in China a few days. We're from the western borders of China."

Guo Xiang pouted: "I know that too, in China we don't recognize the 3 of you." The 3 men looked at each other and the red-faced man asked: "May I ask Miss, who your teacher

is?" Guo Xiang didn't want to reveal the names of her parents at ShaoLin originally. But now she was angry and told them: "My father's name is Guo Jing. And my mother is called Huang Rong. I don't have a teacher, I learnt a bit of martial arts from my parents."

The 3 old men looked at each other and the pale-face man softly said: "Guo Jing? Huang Rong? Of which school do they belong? Whose disciples are they?"

Guo Xiang was infuriated, because her parents were respected throughout the realm. Even ordinary people know them, let alone WuLin persons, the famous great hero Guo Jing was respected for guarding the city of XiangYang for many years.

But judging from their expressions, they are not pretending to be ignorant. She realised: "These 3 Saints of KunLun live on the western borders and rarely come to China. Otherwise, with their martial arts father and mother were bound to mention them to me. If they truly don't know my parents then it's not strange. It's very likely that they just study martial arts at Mount KunLun and forget all other matters."

When she realised this, her anger disappeared, she is not a girl to throw tantrums and said: "My name is Guo Xiang. Fine, I have told you everything you wanted to know. Sirs, may I be so bold to ask you what your names are?"

The red-faced man smiled: "That's a good girl, now you show respect to seniors."

He pointed to the yellow-faced man and said: "That's our eldest martial arts brother, his name Pan TianGeng, I'm the second martial arts brother and my name is Fang TianLao. This is my third martial arts brother and his name is Wei

TianWang. The 3 of us all belong to the Tian character generation."

Guo Xiang nodded and remembered their names and asked: "Are you going to the ShaoLin Monastery or not? Have you battle the monks there? And who is better?" Wei TianWang sternly asked her: "How did you know we're going to compete with the ShaoLin monks? Hardly anyone knows this and when did you know this? Tell us now!" He walked towards Guo Xiang made a fist and stared at Guo Xiang very viciously. Guo Xiang thought: "Do you really think you can intimidate me? Originally I wanted to tell you, but now I won't talk."

She gave him an indifferent eye and said coldly: "Your name is good, why don't you change it in to TianE ('born viciously')?"

Wei TianWang angrily shouted: "What?"

Guo Xiang said: "I never met a more vicious man like you, you grabbed my weapon and you're still this fierce. Are you the Deity of Ferociousness in reincarnation?"

Wei TianWang made a few strange noises like an animal and his chest swelled up and it looked like his hair and eyebrows raised too.

Fang TianLao said: "Third brother, don't get upset." and he pulled Guo Xiang back and he stood between the 2 of them.

Guo Xiang saw Wei TianWang and knew if he attacked, she would not be able to withstand it and was beginning to get a bit scared.

Wei TianWang pulled out the short sword of Guo Xiang and

used 2 fingers to hold it and used his internal strength to break it into 2 halves. He returned the broken half back into the scabbard and said: "Who wants your unworthy sword." Guo Xiang saw the powerful energy of his fingers and looked in awe.

Wei TianWang saw her expression and was very pleased and laughed heartily. This laughter was ear-piercing and shook the roof tiles of the pavilion.

Suddenly the roof cracked open and something fell down. Everyone was surprised at this and even Wei TianWang was even more surprised. He used his internal strength to make a laughing sound to tremble the tiles. But actually there was no tone of pleasure in his laughter. When he saw the roof cracking open he thought that without his own knowledge he reached a higher level in his cultivation of internal energy.

When he looked at that "thing" that dropped down he was shocked to see a man in a white robe holding a zither. He was just lying there, closing his eyes.

Guo Xiang was pleased to see him and said: "You're here too." This man was the man she met earlier.

The man jumped up when he heard Guo Xiang talking to him and said: "Miss, I was looking for you. I didn't know you were here."

Guo Xiang said: "Why are you looking for me?" That man said: "I forgot to ask you something, namely [Miss, may I ask what your name is?]."

Guo Xiang said: "How very formal, I can't stand that genteel and mournful way of talking." That man was stunned for a moment and laughed: "You're right, you're right. Those that

cling on to mere conventionalities and put on airs have no real abilities. Those men are only fit to fool ignorant peasants." after saying that he looked at Wei TianWang and scoffed.

Guo Xiang was very happy and thought this man was helping her.

Wei TianWang stared at him and his face became even more white and coldly asked: "May I know your name, Sir?"

That man ignored him and asked: "Miss, what's your name?"

Guo Xiang said: "My name is Guo Xiang."

That man clapped his hand and said: "Forgive me for not recognizing you, you're the famous Miss Guo. Your father is the great hero Master Guo Jing and your mother is the famous heroine Master Huang Rong. With the exception for ignorant peasants and idiots, everyone in the realm of martial arts knows them. The 2 of them are well-versed in both literary and martial arts, and are well-versed in sabre, swords, spears, halberds. Also renowned for their palm, fist techniques, internal energy, zither, chess, calligraphy, art, composing poems and songs. But there are clearly some foolish people who have never heard of them before."

Guo Xiang was quite amused and thought: "You're were listening at our conversation on the roof. It seems that you don't know my parents are. And my father being well-versed in literary fields is even more hilarious." She laughed and said: "Well, what's your name?"

The man answered: "My name is He ZuDao." Guo Xiang smiled and said: "He ZuDao! He Zu Dao Zai ('not worth mentioning')? A very modest name."

He ZuDao said: "Compared to Tian ('heaven') something or Di ('earth') something these arrogant bragging, overweening ignoramuses, my name isn't that appalling."

He ZuDao keeps mocking the 3 of them, they could keep their tempers under control because they knew this man wasn't an ordinary man. But He's remarks were getting even more insulting and Wei TianWang was the first to attack and raised his palm to strike He ZuDao. He ZuDao ducked his head and passed under Wei's arms. Wei TianWang felt a numbness in his left hand and saw that He seized the sword out of his hand. When Wei TianWang seized the sword, he was so swift that no one could see his movements, but He ZuDao did in a very floating and light manner.

Wei TianWang was shocked and he used his hands as claws to try to get the sword back. He aimed for He's shoulder. He avoided that claw. Pan TianGeng and Fang TianLao leapt out of the pavilion. Wei TianWang attacked with both hands, left hand with a fist, right hand palm stances causing a 'whooshing sound.' He ZuDao avoided Wei's 7, 8 stances, Wei couldn't even touch He's clothes. With one hand holding the sword, he could still avoid the attacker's violent attacks, with a small movement Wei TianWang's attacks were always in vain.

Guo Xiang, herself was not a real martial arts expert due to her young age. However, her friends and relatives are all top martial arts experts of this time so her insight is very profound on martial arts. When she saw that He ZuDao used balanced movements and very clever moves to avoid very violent attacks she knew his martial arts were of an entire different type and were very different from the martial arts found in China.

Wei TianWang used 20 stances already and still couldn't force his opponent to fight back, so he took a deep breath and his fist techniques changed and he attacked slowly now but the force of his fists increased. Guo Xiang felt his energy and stepped out of the pavilion.

At this point, He ZuDao didn't dare just to avoid these attacks and hung the sword at his belt and stood still and yelled: "You're not the only one skilled in tough martial arts." When Wei's 2 palms reached him He used his left hand to respond at this attack. Tough against tough, the 3 palms made a 'bamming' sound. Wei's body shook and he took 2 paces back. He ZuDao stood still.

Wei TianWang always believed that this skill of his was unequaled in the realm. But today he was unable to win and he himself was pushed back 2 paces. He wasn't ready to give up and took a deep breath and yelled out both palms pushed forward. He ZuDao yelled out too and returned a palm, shaking the broken roof.

Wei TianWang backed 4 paces, before he could stand still again. After 2 times of palm to palm attacks his hair was messy and he had bug-eyes now looking very eerie. He put his hands around his public region and took a few breaths causing his chest to swell up again. All his joints made a funny cracking sound and he walked towards He ZuDao.

He ZuDao didn't dare to be inattentive and readied himself to encounter him. Wei TianWang kept walking towards He and walked so close that they could feel each other's breath. At this point, one of Wei's palms aimed for He's face the other palm aimed for the lower abdomen. With this attack he hoped to divide the opponent's energy. This stance was very violent and fierce.

He ZuDao used his both palms to meet up with Wei's palms. He divided his energy into 2 sorts, Ying and Yang. Wei felt that the palm that aimed for his face was empty and hollow, the other palm felt it hit an iron brick wall. Wei TianWang knew this wasn't good and he felt an enormous energy coming towards him and pushing him out of the pavilion.

This sort of tough attacks, the weaker one will be injured and there was no way to avoid that. No matter whether Wei TianWang could stand still or fall down. His own energy was reflected back and He ZuDao's energy was added to it. Wei was surely to cough up blood. Pan TianGeng and Fang TianLao both yelled: "Now!" Both jumped up and grabbed Wei's arms and picked him up, and helped him avoid the enormous blow. Although Wei TianWang wasn't injured, his 5 internal organs felt like it was turned upside-down and all his joints seemed to be cracked. He couldn't breathe easily now and was panting.

Fang TianLao was angry and surprised to see his third martial arts brother wounded but remained smiling and said: "Your palm techniques are indeed very powerful, and are hardly equaled in the realm. My respects."

Guo Xiang thought: "When it comes to powerful palm techniques, who can match my father's 18 Dragon-Subduing Palms. You, The 3 Saints of KunLun, are just too ignorant. One of these days you'll meet a true hero of the central plains."

When she thought of this, she felt grieved again. Because she wished that the hero they would meet was Yang Guo and not her father Guo Jing.

Fang TianLao said: "This unworthy old man wants to try your swordsmanship."

He ZuDao said: "Brother Fang was very friendly towards Miss Guo. I don't blame you for anything and we needn't battle."

Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "The reason why you taught Wei TianWang a lesson was that he was very rude to me?"

Fang TianLao drew his sword and used a finger to tick the tip of his sword. The sword made a humming sound. When Fang drew his sword, his smile disappeared. The sword pointed into the sky and this stance was called "An Immortal Giving Directions."

He ZuDao said: "If brother Fang really wants to battle I'll use the short sword of Miss Guo." He drew the broken sword, the sword originally was very short and after Wei TianWang broke it was even shorter. Furthermore, the tip was gone now and it didn't even resemble a dagger.

He ZuDao held the scabbard in his left hand and thrust the sword forward. This was a very fast maneuver, Fang TianLao saw a white flash and already He ZuDao attacked with 3 stances, because the sword He used was too short he couldn't wound Fang TianLao. But Fang was still frightened and thought: "Very fast 3 stances, most difficult to block. What kind of swordsmanship does he use? If he used an ordinary long sword I would be dead by now."

After He ZuDao attacked with 3 stances, he backed away and stood still. Fang TianLao displayed his sword techniques in half defending and half attacking. He ZuDao avoided the attacks and didn't counter attack. Suddenly he attacked with incredible speed again forcing Fang TianLao to be in a frantic rush. And He ZuDao jumped back again. Fang TianLao displayed his sword into a white light, and his movements were very swift.

Guo Xiang thought: "This old man's techniques are violent, fierce, ruthless and viscous. Similar to the palm techniques of Wei TianWang, but he's swifter and makes him more lethal....."

When she thought of here, she heard He ZuDao yell out: "Be careful!" After saying 'careful' his scabbard in his left hand was quick as lightning and encased Fangs' sword and his right hand sword pointed at the throat of Fang TianLao.

Fang TianLaos' sword was stuck in the scabbard and couldn't be used to block that stance. Seeing that sword was about to thrust through his throat, he let go of his sword and rolled away on the ground and avoided that lethal blow. Before Fang got up, Pan TianGeng seized the hilt of the sword and pulled it out of the scabbard. Both Guo Xiang and He ZuDao exclaimed: "Excellent movement!" This sickly looking old man didn't say a word, but it was evident his martial arts were above his two younger martial arts brothers.

He ZuDao said: "Sir, you have very good martial arts. My respects." He ZuDao turned his head to Guo Xiang and said: "Miss Guo, after hearing your enchanting performance earlier, I've composed another song. And I would like you to give me your opinion."

Guo Xiang asked: "What kind of song is it?" He ZuDao sat on the ground and started to prepare his zither.

Pan TianGeng said: "You've defeated my two martial arts brothers. I would like to compete with you."

He ZuDao shook his hands and said: "I have already competed and had no pleasure in it. I want to play a song for Miss Guo now. It's a new song, if you're interested you can

stay and listen if you don't understand you're welcome to leave." And started playing the zither.

Guo Xiang was amazed and pleased. Somehow He ZuDao composed this new song from the song she played earlier. Making it even more brilliant and interesting. The music was very mesmerizing.

The actual translation will have to wait for some time, or someone else already knows the translation. He/she is welcome to do that part.

At one point of this song, He ZuDao mentioned a "she" in his lyrics, Guo Xiang thought: "The "she" in his song, could it be me? The music was very touching, moving and was filled with admiration and love."

Realising that Guo Xiang blushed. Never in her life did she even hear such beautiful music.

Pan TianGeng and others didn't understand any of this. They don't know that He ZuDao was a rather arrogant man with a flair of a silly bookworm behavior.

After composing a new song he rushed over to play it for Guo Xiang. Furthermore, he composed it for her and he forgot everything else. But seeing him like this, Pan and the others thought he was looking down upon them and couldn't restrain their anger anymore.

Pan pointed the sword at He ZuDaos' shoulder and yelled: "Stand up, I want to battle you."

He ZuDao was entirely into the music and thought himself to be a proud scholar who was roaming about to enjoy the scenery. He vaguely saw a very gentle young girl standing on

a small island. No matter what stood in his way he had to reach her.....

Suddenly he felt a pain in his shoulder and raised his head to see Pan TianGeng pointing a sword against his shoulder and penetrating a bit of skin. He knew that if he didn't fight Pan would surely wound him. However, he didn't finish his song yet and felt that these Philistines were preventing him from finishing his song to Guo Xiang.

He ZuDao drew the broken sword of Guo Xiang in his left hand and blocked Pan TianGeng's attacks and used his right hand to play the zither.

He ZuDao displayed his special ability, one hand playing the zither and the other hand using a sword. He managed perfectly well with one hand playing the zither. He also used a puff of air to play another chord of the zither.

Pan TianGeng attacked rapidly with a few violent techniques, He ZuDao easily blocked them and his eyes were concentrated on the zither and was afraid his puff of air will disperse.

Pan TianGeng became angrier and angrier, his sword techniques were becoming fiercer and fiercer, but still He ZuDao easily warded them off.

Guo Xiang was listening to the music and didn't pay any attention to the attacks of Pan TianGeng. However, the sounds of the swords intersecting was disturbing the music. She softly clapped her hands and raised her eyebrows and said to Pan TianGeng: "Your techniques are not in unison, are you not familiar with music? If you listen carefully the sounds of the swords won't disrupt the music."

Pan TianGeng didn't pay any attention to her and saw that the enemy was sitting on the ground and was concentrated on the zither. And still he wasn't able to overcome He ZuDao, Pan became very anxious and his stances changed to rapid attacks and the clatter of the sounds were becoming very dense. This sound was the total opposite of the gentle soft music. He ZuDao raised his eyebrows and passed strength to his sword and the sword of Pan TianGeng made 'clank' sound and broke into two halves. However, one of the chords of the zither broke as well. Pan TianGeng looked very pale and didn't say a word and left the pavilion. The 3 martial arts brother mounted their horses and quickly rode up the mountain.

Guo Xiang was a bit surprised to see that and said: "These 3 men were defeated, how come they're still headed towards the ShaoLin Monastery? Do they really want to fight to the end?"

She turned to He ZuDao and saw him looking sad and was touching that broken chord and looked very unhappy. Guo Xiang thought: "Just a broken chord why so unhappy?" She picked up the zither and removed the broken chord and was tuning the zither again.

He ZuDao sighed: "After all these years of training, I still cannot focus properly. I used force in my left hand breaking his sword but also breaking that chord."

Now Guo Xiang understood and knew he was unhappy that his martial arts was still not perfect and smiled: "You want to fight with your left hand and play the zither with your right hand. This form of using your concentration of 2 matters is only known to three persons in the realm. You haven't reached that level yet, why worry so much about it."

He ZuDao asked: "Who are these three people?" Guo Xiang said: "The first one is "The Old Imp" Zhou BoTong, the second one is my father and the third one is Madame Yang, Xiao LongNu. Apart from these 3 people, even people with great martial arts like my grandfather the lord of the Peach Blossom Island, my mother and "the Condor Hero" Yang Guo are unable to that."

He ZuDao said: "It's hard to believe that there are so many astonishing people in the realm. You must introduce me to them."

Guo Xiang faintly said: "If you want to meet my father that is not difficult, as for the other two, I don't even know where to look." She saw He ZuDao looking disappointed she said: "You've defeated "The 3 Saints of KunLun" which is a amazing thing. Why fret over such a small incident like a broken chord."

He ZuDao was shocked and asked: "The 3 Saints of KunLun? What are you talking about? And how did you know?"

Guo Xiang smiled: "Those 3 old men came from the western borders, they must be "The 3 Saints of KunLun." They do have their unique abilities, but challenging ShaoLin is a bit too arrogant....."

She saw that He ZuDao was looking very strangely and asked: "What's so strange?"

He ZuDao softly said: "The 3 Saints of KunLun, The 3 Saints of KunLun, He ZuDao. That's me."

Guo Xiang was surprised and asked: "You're "The 3 Saints of KunLun"? Where are the other 2?"

He ZuDao said: "The 3 Saints of KunLun" is one person, there were never 3. I have established a small reputation in the western borders, and the local friends say that my chess, sword and zither skills are superb. Also they say I'm fit to be a saint in the zither, a saint in chess and a saint in swordsmanship. But I knew that the saint was not something that could easily be assumed. So I changed my name to He ZuDao ('not worth mentioning'). So when other people hear my name they won't think I'm an arrogant, overbearing man."

Guo Xiang smiled and clapped her hands: "Now I get it. I thought that "The 3 Saints of KunLun were 3 persons. But who were those 3 old men?"

He ZuDao answered: "They? Those were ShaoLin disciples."

Guo Xiang was even more confused and said: "So they belong to ShaoLin. Right, their martial arts were firm and strong. Indeed that red-faced man used "DaMo" swordsmanship and the sickly-looking man used "WeiTuo" Demon-Subduing Sword techniques. But there were a lot of changes and alterations to them I couldn't recognize them. Why did they come here?"

He ZuDao said: "This is not without reason. Last year Spring, I was at Mount KunLun, peak JingShen playing the zither. Suddenly I heard fighting noises and took a look and saw 2 men were struggling on the ground. Both were heavily injured but both were still wrestling with each other. I yelled at them to stop but they still continued and walked over to push them aside. When I did so, one of them fell down and died, the other was still breathing. I took him to my home and gave him some medicines, after half a day he was revived. But he was mortally wounded and no medicine could prolong his life anymore. Before he died he said his name

was Yin KeXi....."

Guo Xiang called out in surprise and asked: "Was the other man called Xiao XiangZi? He was very tall and skinny and his face looked like a corpse, right?"

He ZuDao was surprised and said: "Yes, how did you know?"

Guo Xiang said: "I saw them once, I never thought they 2 would fight each other to the death."

He ZuDao said: "That Yin KeXi said he did a life full wicked deeds, there was no use in feeling sorry for himself anymore. He said that he and Xiao XiangZi went to the ShaoLin Monastery and stole a manuscript, both of them were suspicious of each other. Both of them didn't trust each other and were afraid if the other one learnt the manuscript he would kill the other one and keep the manuscript for himself. Both ate at the same table, slept in the same bed and didn't leave the other out of sight. But, both were afraid that one would put in poison in the food or sneak up on him in the night and kill him. Both were extremely edgy and couldn't eat or rest properly, also, they were afraid that ShaoLin monks would catch up on them. So they went to the western borders and at Peak JingShen, both were extremely weary and knew if this continued both of them would be tired to death. So they fought it out there and then. According to Yin KeXi, Xiao XiangZi's martial arts was better than his and attacked first. Yin KeXi suffered a blow, but in the end, Yin KeXi gained the advantage. Then Yin realised that Xiao XiangZi was heavily injured at Mount Hua and hadn't recovered yet. If otherwise, they wouldn't have made it to Mount KunLun."

After Guo Xiang heard this story she thought of the situation Yin KeXi and Xiao XiangZi were in and became gloomy and

sighed: "Just because of a manuscript, this isn't worth it."

He ZuDao said: "After telling this, Yin KeXi was having difficulty breathing and begged me to go to the ShaoLin Monastery and tell a monk called JueYuan something about 'the manuscript is in the oil' ('Jing Zai You Zhong'). I found this sentence very strange and didn't understand what he meant with the manuscript in the oil. Just when I wanted to ask him what he meant, he fainted. I thought after he rested for awhile I will ask him again. But he never woke up again. I thought perhaps he hid the manuscript in an oilcloth, but I couldn't find anything in their clothes. Anyway, I have been entrusted to deliver a message so I decided to carry this mission out. Furthermore, I've never been to China before so I decided to tour around for some time and ended up here.

Guo Xiang asked: "Why did you leave a note at ShaoLin? And challenged the ShaoLin monks?"

He ZuDao smiled and said: "This is has to do with those 3 old men earlier. They are the ShaoLin disciples of the Western ShaoLin Monastery. According to the people there, they belong to the same "Tian" generation as the TianMing abbot of this ShaoLin. It seems that their patriarch had a disagreement with his martial arts brothers here and in a fury he left and founded the Western ShaoLin Monastery. Originally, the martial arts of ShaoLin came with Master DaMo of India to China and from China to the western regions. Which wasn't a strange thing. These 3 men heard of my reputation as "The 3 Saints of KunLun" and wanted to duel with me. On their way here, they kept boasting that ShaoLin martial arts were unequalled in the realm, I was permitted to be a saint in chess and the zither but not in swordsmanship. So I had to be the 2 saints instead of 3. And this happened before I met Yin KeXi so I thought I could finish 2 tasks in one go. I sent someone to notify those 3 old men to

meet me at the ShaoLin Monastery. Anyway, the 3 of them were travelling very fast and could catch up with me."

Guo Xiang laughed: "I guessed entirely wrong. I wonder what those 3 old men will say when they reach the ShaoLin Monastery."

He ZuDao said: "I don't have any grudges against ShaoLin so I left a note that I will come 10 days later. I did this because I wanted those 3 old men to arrive at ShaoLin and battle them. But now the duel is over, let us go to ShaoLin together and after I delivered the message we will leave again."

Guo Xiang frowned her eyebrows and said: "The rules of these monks are very strict, women may not enter."

He ZuDao said: "Pooh! What damn rules! We're just going to enter and what are they going to do about it? Kill us?"

Guo Xiang is a rather meddlesome girl, but after meeting reverend Wuse she has no bad feelings towards ShaoLin and shook her head and smiled: "I'll wait for you outside, you just enter and deliver the message. There's no need to create unnecessary trouble."

He ZuDao nodded and said: "Alright! I haven't finished playing my song for you after delivering the message I'll played once again for you."

End of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 - At the top of Mount WuDang the Pines and Cypresses are grown

(Translated by Athena)



The 18 disciples of the DaMo Hall stepped forward to seize Zhang JunBao. JueYuan didn't think anymore and turned a circle and the 2 iron buckets were rotating, causing the monks to back off. JueYuan threw the remaining water out of the buckets and placed Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao in the buckets. He whirled the buckets round and round like a pair of comet hammers. All the disciples of the DaMo Hall quickly moved away.

Guo Xiang and He ZuDao walked towards the ShaoLin Monastery, before long they reached the gates of ShaoLin and didn't see anyone.

He ZuDao said: "I'm not going in either, I'll just ask that monk to come out and deliver the message." He raised his voice and said: "He ZuDao of Mount KunLun pays a visit to the ShaoLin Monastery, I have something to say."

After he said that, they could hear 10 large bells ringing.

The door opened and 2 rows of grey-robed monks came out. In the left row there were 54 monks and on the right side there were also 54 monks. There were 108 monks, these were all disciples of the LuoHan Hall, filling up the positions of the 108 Arhats. After them, 18 monks came out wearing yellow kasayas. These monks looked a bit older than the disciples of the LuoHan Hall, they were the senior pupils of the DaMo Hall. After awhile 7 old monks came out wearing robes with big squares. These 7 monks all had wrinkles, the youngest was 70 odd years the eldest was about 90 years old. These were the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall. After them, Abbot TianMing came out, on his left reverend WuXiang head of the DaMo Hall and on the right reverend WuSe of the LuoHan Hall. Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang followed after the 3 elders.

In the end there were 70, 80 *common disciples of the ShaoLin Monastery.

(*These pupils are not monks, just ordinary people. For example, pupils like Xiao Feng, Chen YouLiang, etc. belong to this category)

That day He ZuDao sneaked into ShaoLin and left a note in the LuoHan Hall. This incident startled abbot TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang. Days later Pan, Fang and Wei said they would come to ShaoLin and duel, making all the monks very restless and vigilant. The Western ShaoLin was located far away from here and for many years the monks there didn't make any contact with the ShaoLin monks here. But all the monks knew that the patriarch of the Western ShaoLin Master GuWei was a powerful martial arts expert. So his disciples should be extraordinary people too. After hearing that Pan, Fang, and Wei didn't dare to look down upon "The 3 Saints of KunLun," and as the saying goes: "He who has come is surely strong or he'd never come along". The entire monastery was very vigilant and the abbot has ordered every disciple within a radius of 250 kilometers to return to the monastery and await orders.

In the beginning, everyone thought that "The 3 Saints of KunLun" were 3 people, but after hearing from Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao, and Wei TianWang they knew it was only 1 man. But concerning age and appearances, even Pan and the others weren't too sure. They only knew that he was proud of his skills in the zither, chess, and swordsmanship. Playing the zither and chess could slacken and leisure the heart and concentration that does no good to their Buddhist meditation. But martial arts experts who specialize in swordsmanship were very willing to duel with this arrogant man who called himself a "Saint of Swordsmanship".

Pan TianGeng and his 2 martial arts brothers felt very confident of themselves and thought this entire incident was their doing and hope to travel thousands of miles to finish it here. They wanted to defeat He ZuDao before he could reach the monastery . After that, they would have a duel with the monks of the monastery and the Western ShaoLin will be greater than the Northern ShaoLin Monastery. However, after the battle at the stone pavilion, He ZuDao only used half of his abilities and he could easily overcome Pan, Fang, and Wei.

After abbot TianMing heard of this, he knew that ShaoLin was facing an imminent danger. After careful analysis he realised that he, WuSe, and WuXiang were about the same level as Pan, Fang, and Wei. So he asked the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall to help out if necessary. However, no one knew how high the martial arts of the 7 elders were, and if they are strong enough to defeat He ZuDao if it really was necessary. These were all speculations of abbot TianMing, reverends WuSe and WuXiang.

When abbot TianMing saw He ZuDao and Guo Xiang he put his palms together and said: "This must be the saints of chess, swordsmanship and zither, Benefactor He. Forgive us for a late welcome."

He ZuDao returned respects and said: "My name is indeed He ZuDao, the nickname of 3 saints is not worth mentioning. I apologize for causing trouble at your monastery and I dare not deserve having all reverends coming to welcome me."

TianMing thought: "This arrogant scholar doesn't talk very arrogant. He seems to be around 30 years old, how could he easily defeat Pan and his martial arts brothers?"

TianMing said: "You're very kind benefactor He, please enter

our monastery for tea. However this benefactress....." He looked a bit awkward.

When He ZuDao heard that abbot TianMing wasn't going to allow Guo Xiang to enter, his arrogance was aroused and laughed: "Old abbot, I came here to deliver a message on behalf of someone. After doing that I'll leave, but the rules set by your monastery prohibiting women from entering is ludicrous. Frankly, I have problems with that rule. According to Buddhism, every life is equally precious, not making unnecessary distinctions between men and women."

Abbot TianMing is an enlightened priest, and is very broad-minded. TianMing smiled and said: "Thank you for pointing that out. We are a bit petty when it comes to that. Well, Miss Guo, please enter for tea too."

Guo Xiang smiled at He ZuDao and said: "You're very eloquent, with just a few words this old monk already gave in."

Abbot TianMing moved aside and made a gesture to welcome guests when suddenly an old and skinny monk to the left of TianMing stepped forward and said: "Just because of benefactor He's one sentence, ShaoLin should abolish an ancient custom, which isn't a bad thing, but we would like to see if the person who said those words have any real, impressive abilities. Or does he just clings on to a false reputation. I would like to ask benefactor He to reveal 1, 2 special abilities so all the monks can be convinced of your specialties, so we all know that we just abolished a thousand year old rule for a worthy purpose."

The old monk who said this was reverend WuXiang, head of the DaMo Hall. His voice was clear and loud showing that his internal strength was full and solid. When Pan TianGen, Fang

TianLao and Wei TianWang heard this, their facial expressions changed. The words of WuXiang clearly indicate he has no high opinion of these 3 Western ShaoLin disciples. He ZuDao defeating them didn't necessarily mean He ZuDao had any great abilities.

Guo Xiang saw reverend WuSe looking awkward and thought this old monk is a good man and a friend of Yang Guo. If He ZuDao really fought against the monks, and either party would lose, she would still feel bad about it. So she said to He ZuDao: "Brother He, I don't really have to enter the monastery. After you've delivered the message, we'll go."

Guo Xiang pointed at WuSe and said: "This reverend WuSe is a good friend of mine. I hope you can be friends too."

He ZuDao said: "Oh, I see." and turned to abbot TianMing and said: "Old abbot, there is a Master JueYuan here in the monastery. Who is it? I have been entrusted a message that I have to deliver to him."

Abbot TianMing softly said: "Master JueYuan?"

JueYuan's position is very low in the monastery. For many years he was just staying in the library and no one really paid any attention to him. Also, never did anyone call him [Master JueYuan] so that's why abbot TianMing didn't know who He ZuDao meant. After awhile, TianMing said: "Oh! The monk who lost the "Ni Jia Scriptures". Benefactor He, does this have to do with the lost of the "Ni Jia Scriptures."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "I really don't know."

TianMing told a pupil: "Tell JueYuan to come out and meet our guests."

The disciple quickly left.

Reverend WuXiang said: "Benefactor He, is the saints of the zither, chess and swordsmanship. Ordinary people wouldn't dare to be called [saint]. Benefactor He must have extraordinary abilities in these 3 arts. Many days ago you left a note in the monastery telling us that you're were eager to display your martial arts. Today you have come and we are very eager to see your martial arts."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "Miss Guo already said that both parties should not create any grudges."

WuXiang was really annoyed and thought: "You left a note challenging us, now you're saying you don't want to fight. In these 1000 years, who dared to look down upon ShaoLin like that? Furthermore, Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang were defeated at your hands. If word would get out that the head disciples of the ShaoLin School were defeated by you, your name the saint of swordsmanship will be even more famous in WuLin. Ordinary pupils are no match for him, I must challenge him personally."

WuXiang walked forward and said: "Exchanging views on martial arts doesn't necessarily mean creating grudges. Benefactor He, there is no reason to be humble."

Wuxiang turned to a disciple of the DaMo Hall and said: "Get a sword! We will see the swordsmanship of the famous [saint of swordsmanship]. And we will see if the word [saint] is the right word to name it."

The weapons of the monastery were already prepared, but were not brought out. That was to avoid people from saying ShaoLin monks were petty.

The disciple went back in and brought 7, 8 swords and went to He ZuDao and said: "Benefactor He, will you be using your own weapon or will you be using one of our swords?"

He ZuDao didn't answer and picked up a sharp rock from the ground and started carving lines in the tiles. He drew a chess board with that sharp rock. Every line was precise, accurate, and deeply carved into the stone tiles. He ZuDao just picked up a rock and drew this, this use and possession of internal energy was rare in the realm. He ZuDao laughed and said: "Dueling with swords might create unnecessary animosities between us. There is no way in competing music. If all you are interested, we could play chess."

This display of internal energy and drawing a chessboard with a small rock was amazing. TianMing, WuSe, WuXiang and the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall looked at each other and were stunned.

Abbot TianMing knew that this man's internal strength was very powerful and no one in the monastery was his match. The abbot was about to admit defeat when they heard a metallic sound walking towards them. It was JueYuan carrying two large metal buckets. Behind him was a young tall man. JueYuan put down the buckets and paid his respects to TianMing and said: "I await your orders, abbot."

TianMing said: "This benefactor He has something to tell you."

JueYuan turned around and didn't know who He ZuDao was. JueYuan said: "I am JueYuan. Benefactor He, can I help you?"

After He ZuDao finished drawing the chessboard, his interest for chess was awoken and asked: "The message can wait now. Who is interested in a game of chess?" He ZuDao didn't

want to show off his martial arts, but he was always very captivated by the arts of zither, chess and swordsmanship. If his interest was awoken he can forget everything around him. He ZuDao just wanted a monk to play chess with now and forgot entirely about fighting.

Abbot TianMing said: "Benefactor He's ability to draw a chessboard with a mere rock is amazing. Such magnificent ability is something I have never seen before. All the monks here are no match for you."

When JueYuan heard these words, he looked at the lines on the ground and realised that this He ZuDao came here to challenge the ShaoLin Monastery. JueYuan picked up the iron buckets and took a deep breath and focused all his internal strength to his feet and started walking towards the lines.

The chains bound to JueYuan's feet dragged over the lines and erasing it. When the monks saw that, everyone called: "Good!"

TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang were surprised and happy to see that this old and pedant monk had such powerful internal energy. They lived in the monastery all these years and never realised it before. TianMing knows that no matter how powerful the internal energy of one person is, he/she can never leave such deep prints in the ground. The reason why JueYuan could do this was that his iron buckets were filled with water so in total, there was 200 kilograms.

Before JueYuan could erase all the lines, He ZuDao spoke to him: "Very powerful internal energy, I don't have such powerful internal strength."

JueYuan felt his energy growing in his public region but his legs were getting tired. JueYuan stopped when he heard He

ZuDao talking to him and turned to him and said with a smile: "Is there a difference in white and black pieces?"

He ZuDao said: "Right! This game of chess cannot be played anymore, I lose. I will try your swordsmanship." He ZuDao drew his sword and aimed for his own chest and the hilt was facing the opponent. This was a very strange technique and looked like he was trying to kill himself. In all the sword stances in the world there was never such a strange technique.

JueYuan said: "I only how know to meditate and recite scriptures. My responsibility is to tidy the library. I've never learnt martial arts."

He ZuDao didn't believe him and scoffed. He ZuDao advanced forward, the tip of the sword was now aiming for JueYuan's chest. This technique was very fast and was practically unequalled by all sword techniques in the realm. This stance wasn't meant to aim for yourself but the position He ZuDao took was to generate his internal energy to the sword and lash out. However, JueYuan's internal energy was so powerful it was able to come and go as JueYuan pleases. JueYuan used one of the buckets to block this technique and the tip of the sword hit the iron bucket. The sword bent a bit and He ZuDao retrieved this technique and attacked again. JueYuan used the other bucket to block that stance.

He ZuDao thought: "No matter how high your martial arts is, these buckets are not easy to be handled. How can you block my stances? If you used your hands instead I would have slightly feared you."

He ZuDao used his index finger to point at the tip of the sword producing a buzzing sound. It was similar to a cry of a dragon.

He ZuDao called out: "Watch out, old monk!" With incredible speed He ZuDao launched 16 stances towards JueYuan.

However, JueYuan blocked all of them, these 16 techniques were called "The Swift Lightning Swordsmanship."

Everyone could see that JueYuan was in a frantic state, anyone knew now that JueYuan didn't know any martial arts at all.

These excellent sword techniques of He ZuDao were all blocked in a very silly way.

WuSe and WuXiang were very worried and called out: "Please spare him, benefactor He!"

Even Guo Xiang called out: "Don't harm him!"

He ZuDao put everything he knew in this battle but still couldn't overcome this monk.

He didn't believe this monk didn't know any martial arts. The reason why JueYuan could avoid being hit was that he had very powerful internal energy.

He ZuDao realised his swift techniques were in vain and yelled out. A light flash was aiming for JueYuan's abdomen.

JueYuan called out and used the 2 buckets to clip down the sword. He ZuDao wanted to pull the sword back but couldn't move an inch. Quickly, He ZuDao changed technique and released the sword and placed all his energy to his palms and attacked with his palms. He aimed for JueYuan's head.

At this point, JueYuan couldn't block that move anymore. The

situation was very dangerous. Zhang JunBao was very worried for his teacher, so Zhang leapt out and used the technique that Yang Guo taught him 3 years ago, namely "Extend in all Directions." Zhang hit He ZuDao on his left shoulder.

At this time, the internal energy of JueYuan was focused on the 2 buckets. The energy forced the water out in 2 spouts of water. When the energy of He ZuDao met with the spouts of water, the water was dispersed but also the energy of He ZuDao was gone. Both He ZuDao and JueYuan were wet.

He ZuDao was engaged in the fight with JueYuan and didn't pay any attention to the young Zhang JunBao. Little did He ZuDao realise that Zhang's palm technique and internal energy were very good and strong. He ZuDao was pushed away and could only stand still after 3 paces backwards.

JueYuan said: "Amitabha, Amitabha! Please let me go, benefactor He. Those few attacks were really frightening." JueYuan used his sleeve to wipe away the water on his face and quickly stepped aside.

He ZuDao angrily said: "The ShaoLin Monastery has indeed many extraordinary people. Even a little boy has such good martial arts. Youngster, let us fight, if you can withstand 10 of my stances I will never step foot again in China."

WuSe and WuXiang knew that Zhang JunBao was just a boy who cleaned the library and helped out JueYuan in his duties. Zhang never learnt any martial arts, he just accidentally hit He ZuDao just then. If they really fought, Zhang JunBao wouldn't last 1 stance.

WuXiang spoke: "Benefactor He, you're wrong. You are called "The 3 Saints of KunLun, your martial arts is unequalled

through the realm. How can you fight with a mere young cleaner? If you don't mind, let me accept that challenge."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "Everyone saw that he just hit me, I cannot let that go unpunished. Watch out, lad!"

This palm technique was very fast and he stood very close to Zhang JunBao. WuSe, WuXiang and others wanted to help but were too late to do anything now.

Everyone was worried for Zhang JunBao. Zhang just stood there and his toes were turning to the left and his body turned fluently to the right, taking on the position of an archer. This time, his right hand and left hand were guarding his waist. His right fist attacked. This was a beginning of the ShaoLin fist style called: "The Flower Fist piercing through right."

This stance was absolutely excellent, this was a movement that should be made by a martial arts expert, not a young boy.

When He ZuDao suffered a blow to his shoulder he knew that this young boy's internal strength was superior to Pan TianGeng and others. But he was confident he could defeat Zhang JunBao within 10 stances. When he saw that attack made by Zhang he was quite impressed and said: "Excellent move!"

WuXiang thought of something and smiled to WuSe: "Congratulations, elder brother for having such a good disciple."

WuSe shook his head and said: "I didn't...." At this point, Zhang JunBao used another 3 stances to counter attack. All the movements were grand and energy generated was full

and fluent, not inferior to any ShaoLin martial artist.

TianMing, WuSe, WuXiang and the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall saw that Zhang JunBao's techniques were that spectacular. They were all stunned. WuXiang said: " The grandness of his stances is nothing compared to his energy....."

At this point, He ZuDao already used 6 stances and thought: "If I cannot defeat this young lad, everyone in WuLin will laugh at me for leaving a note to challenge ShaoLin."

Suddenly He ZuDao changed his movement and used a stance called: "The Floating Snow Flocks of Mount Tian."

His palms were incredibly fast, and it seemed like Zhang JunBao was surrounded by palms.

Zhang JunBao was never really instructed on martial arts by anyone, with the exception of Yang Guo 3 years ago. This is the first time he saw such strange and fast palm techniques and didn't know how to counter it. In a fit of anxiety, he used a ShaoLin stance called: "Two Circling Hands." Zhang JunBao raised his 2 hands above his face and stood there. This stance was very grand and majestic, no matter how, or where He ZuDao attacked, his attacks will always be met by these 2 hands.

The monks of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall were all calling out: "Good!" They were all impressed by Zhang JunBao's technique and praised him for using a simple ShaoLin stance to foil a heavy and complicated palm technique.

He ZuDao changed stance again and aimed a fist towards Zhang JunBao. Zhang returned the attack with a stance called: "The Flower leaning towards the 7 Stars."

Zhang's palm met with He's fist, there was a banging sound. He ZuDao's body shook and Zhang JunBao backed 5 paces. He ZuDao's face changed and said: "One more stance, try your best to deal with it."

Everyone remained silent, they knew that this final attack of He ZuDao was very powerful. They knew that He threw in everything to win at this point.

Again Zhang JunBao used: "The Flower leaning towards the 7 Stars."

This time there was no sound when fist and palm met. Both were generating internal energy. When it comes to all-round martial arts, He ZuDao would win with ease over Zhang JunBao. But when it comes to internal energy, Zhang learnt some parts of the "Jiu Yang" codex so his internal strength kept increasing and increasing. He ZuDao knew he couldn't defeat this young boy and leapt away and let Zhang JunBao's energy dash forward and used his right hand to push gently on Zhang's back causing him to fall over.

He ZuDao waved his hand and smiled wryly: "He ZuDao, He ZuDao. You're are too arrogant."

He ZuDao turned to abbot TianMing and said: "The martial arts of the ShaoLin Monastery are renowned for a thousand years. It is indeed amazing. Today I have seen enough, knowing that the good name of ShaoLin is well deserved."

He turned around and leapt forward a few metres, suddenly he turned around and said to JueYuan: "Reverend JueYuan, someone told me to deliver this message: The manuscript is in the oil/ [Jing Zai You Zhong]."

After saying that, he even leapt further away and his movements were incredibly fast, so fast that it was rare in the realm.

Zhang JuBao slowly struggled up, his face covered with sand. Although he was beaten by He ZuDao, He already admitted his defeat to ShaoLin.

Suddenly one of the old monks of the Meditation Hall spoke sharply and coldly: "Who taught this disciple martial arts?" Everyone felt uncomfortable after hearing this old monk talk.

Abbot TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang were all thinking about this too. They all looked at JueYuan and Zhang JunBao. JueYuan and Zhang just stood there not knowing what was going on now.

TianMing spoke: "JueYuan's internal strength is powerful but he never learnt any other forms of martial arts. Who taught this boy martial arts?"

The disciples of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall were all thinking, luckily today there was a young cleaner who come forward and warded off ShaoLin's disaster. The old abbot will surely reward him and the master who taught him martial arts.

The old monk of the Meditation Hall stood still and his eyebrows were raised. He looked like he was ready to kill someone. The old monk sharply asked Zhang JunBao again: "I'm going to ask you again. Who taught you this LuoHan fist style?"

Zhang JunBao took out the little iron Arhats Guo Xiang gave to him and said: "I just learnt a few stances from these little statues. No one taught me any martial arts."

The old monk stepped forward and slowly said in a threatening way: "Tell me one more time: Your LuoHan fist was NOT imparted by any master of the monastery. You learnt it by yourself."

Zhang JunBao was a bit startled but he also believed he didn't do anything wrong. Even though this old monk looked very stern, he wasn't afraid and said clearly: "I'm just responsible for keeping the library clean and tidy. I'm here to look after and help Master JueYuan. No other reverend in the monastery has taught me martial arts. I learnt this LuoHan fist by myself, I think I might have made a few mistakes in the stances. I hope old Master can give me some pointers."

The old monk's eyes looked like spitting fire and fiercely stared at Zhang JunBao for a ver long time and not moving.

JueYuan knew that this old monk was a senior of the monastery. He was one of the martial arts uncles of abbot TianMing. TianMing, himself, stood a generation higher than JueYuan, WuSe and WuXiang.

JueYuan didn't understand why this old monk was so angry and he saw that the old monk's eyes were filled with hate. Suddenly he realised something, he once read in a codex something that happened more than 70 years ago in the ShaoLin Monastery.

*More than 70 years ago, the abbot of the ShaoLin Monastery was reverend KuCheng. This abbot KuCheng stood 2 generations above abbot TianMing.

One year in Autumn, during a yearly contest held in the DaMo Hall, something disastrous happened. It was a tradition of ShaoLin to examine and evaluate the disciples' martial arts every year. This was done in the DaMo Hall, the abbot

and the 2 elders of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall would be the one to evaluate the disciples to see whether they had improved this year.

That year, the judge was the elder of the DaMo Hall reverend KuZhi and all the disciples were displaying their martial arts.

Suddenly a "TouTuo" entered and yelled out: "KuWei is full of nonsense and doesn't know the real essence of martial arts. He shouldn't even be the head of the DaMo Hall, this old monk is a complete disgrace!"

All the monks were surprised and saw that this "TouTuo" was a mere monk in charge of cooking meals for the ShaoLin disciples. All the monks scolded him and started telling him to be quiet.

Note: "TouTuo" is a Buddhist monk with hair, I believe. Somewhat like Fan Yao, try to remember the TVB 1986 Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre. In that series we see Fan Yao wearing a sort of Buddhist robe and having hair, right? Now that's a "TouTuo." Also, this "TouTuo" who I am mentioning now was a monk with a lowly position in the monastery. He and other similar monks were in charge of cleaning, preparing meals for the "real" ShaoLin disciples. These monks do not participate in studying martial arts or in meditation. They cannot be considered to be ShaoLin disciples. Also this "TouTuo" was called "HuoGong TouTuo" meaning the monk working in the kitchen.

This "HuoGong TouTuo" yelled: "The master is full of crap, the pupils are even more incompetent."

So he went to centre of the hall, and challenged all the ShaoLin disciples one after the other. They were all defeated easily within 3, 4 stances. It was the rule in the DaMo Hall to

be lenient in the battles. But this "HuoGong TouTuo" was very vicious, he defeated the 9 Head disciples of the DaMo Hall, all 9 of those pupils were heavily injured by him.

The elder KuZhi was angry and shocked and saw that this "HuoGong TouTuo" used ShaoLin martial arts, so it wasn't an expert from a different school who came here creating havoc. KuZhi asked him who taught him martial arts.

That "HuoGong TouTuo" said: "No one taught me, I learned it myself."

It seems that the monk who was in charge of the kitchen was a very bad-tempered monk. This monk would often beat up other monks and this monk learned some martial arts so he often hit them very hard.

"HuoGong TouTuo" was beaten up so severely in 3 years that he coughed up blood 3 times. In a fury, he started to secretly study martial arts. All the ShaoLin monks knew martial arts and it was easy for him to secretly observe and learn it. He made extraordinary, painstaking efforts and plus, he was very intelligent so in these 20 years he learned superior martial arts. However, he kept a low profile and performed his duties and even if the head of the kitchen would beat him up he didn't feel a thing anymore with his high internal energy. This "HuoGong TouTuo" also had a sinister and violent personality, he waited till he felt confident no one in the monastery was his match and wanted to show off his abilities in the annual contest. All these years of being beaten up made him hate all the monks in the monastery. So when he fought those monks, he didn't show any mercy.

When reverend KuZhi knew what he did, he scoffed and said: "Taking such trouble is worthy of my respect."

KuZhi stood up and challenged "HuoGong TouTuo" to a fight. Reverend KuZhi was a top martial arts expert from ShaoLin but he was already very old and HuoGong TouTuo was just middle-aged. Secondly, KuZhi was being lenient with his techniques and "HuoGong TouTuo" only used ferocious stances. So they were able to fight each other till 500 stances. At this point, Master KuZhi was gaining the upperhand and both used the same stance, namely "The Grand Intertwining Silk". 4 hands were entangled with each other. However, KuZhi's hands were placed on the death acupoints of HuoGong TouTuo's chest. If KuZhi was to release his energy, "HuoGong TouTuo" was surely to die. But reverend KuZhi admired and respected his ability to learn such powerful martial arts with no one teaching him, so he wanted to spare him. So KuZhi pushed his 2 hands forward and called out: "Turn back now!"

Unfortunately, "HuoGong TouTuo" misinterpreted and thought KuZhi used a technique called: "Eight Strikes of the Divine Palm." One of the special skills of ShaoLin that "HuoGong TouTuo" saw the disciples of the DaMo Hall using was this stance before using both hands to strike out and breaking a wooden beam. The energy released is formidable. Although the martial arts of "HuoGong TouTuo" was high, he never received any pointers from any experts and the martial arts of ShaoLin are deep and profound. He only secretly saw and observed some skills but he could never learn everything completely. The stance KuZhi used was "The Resolve Stance." But "HuoGong TouTuo" thought it was the 6th technique of the "Eighth Strikes of the Divine Palm" namely the "Heart Splitting Palm." He thought: "You want to take my life, don't you? Well, it's not going to be that easy." So he flew towards KuZhi and his 2 fists were aiming for KuZhi's body.

The energy of the fists was incredibly powerful and violent, KuZhi was shocked and quickly raised his palms to block, but

it was too late. Everyone heard a cracking sound, the arm of KuZhi was broken, as well as 4 of his ribs. All the disciples rushed forward to help and they saw KuZhi looking deadly pale and couldn't talk anymore. His internal organs were all severely injured. When they looked up, "HuoGong TouTuo" was gone in the confusion. That same night, reverend KuZhi passed away, the entire monastery was mourning. Little did they expect that "HuoGong TouTuo" sneaked back in ShaoLin and killed the head of the kitchen and 5 other monks who used to bully him.

The entire ShaoLin Monastery was shocked and sent out various martial arts experts to track him down, but in vain.

After this incident, the senior elders of the monastery had an intense argument. And in a fury, the elder of the LuoHan Hall Master KuWei left the Northern ShaoLin Monastery and went to the Western Regions to found a Western ShaoLin Monastery.

Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang are his descendants.

Also because of this, the ShaoLin Monastery was in a down period. The abbot set a new rule: no one was allowed to learn ShaoLin martial arts without a master teaching him. If not, in the worst case, this person will be put to death, and in lighter cases, the muscles and veins of his arms and legs will be snapped and this person will be come disabled for the rest of his life.

But in all these years no one ever learned anything without permission so this rule was forgotten by most monks.

This old monk of the Meditation Hall was the youngest disciple of Master KuZhi and the image of the death of his

teacher is still vividly in his memory. So this incident with Zhang JunBao stirred up his anger and hate.

JueYuan practically read all the manuscripts in the library and remembered these event. So JueYuan broke into cold sweat now and pleaded to the TianMing: "Old abbot, this cannot be blamed on JunBao....."

At this time, the elder of the DaMo Hall reverend WuXiang called: "All the disciples of the DaMo Hall go forward and seize that boy!" The 18 DaMo disciples surrounded Zhang JunBao, JueYuan, and even Guo Xiang. That old monk of the Meditation Hall sternly yelled: "Why don't the disciples of the LuoHan Hall go forward and seize that boy!"

All the 108 disciples said: "Yes!" and surrounded Zhang JunBao, JueYuan and Guo Xiang. There were 3 circles of disciples around them.

Note: This incident of ShaoLin with "HuoGong TouTuo" happened around the same time of the First Battle at Mount Hua. That's why there were no experts from ShaoLin in the 5 Great Experts. - The main reason, and also the most important reason, was of course none of the ShaoLin experts of that time came close to the levels the Huang YaoShi, OuYang Feng, Duang ZhiXing/ Master YiDeng, Hong QiGong and Wang ChongYang. And of course Qiu QianRen and Zhou BoTong. -Second reason, ShaoLin was starting to fall in the realm of martial arts, plus the incident with "HuoGong TouTuo" led to 2 factions in the monastery resulting from reverend KuWei leaving with his followers. -ShaoLin couldn't even protect their own martial arts from being secretly mastered by someone else. I don't think the abbot would have the face to try and to get the "Jiu Yin Zhen Jing." Arrogant people like OuYang Feng and Huang YaoShi would surely scoff and say something like: "ShaoLin can't even

protect their own manuscripts and now they want to get their hands on Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. Such audacity!"-The last reason should be why should ShaoLin try to get hold of Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. The martial arts of ShaoLin is deep and profound already. Why be greedy while many special ShaoLin skills are waiting to be mastered?

Zhang JunBao was in a frantic state, he believed that by defeating He ZuDao he broke the rules of the monastery.

JueYuan loved Zhang JunBao like a son and he also knew that if Zhang was captured, he will certainly be punished severely.

At this time, he heard WuXiang call out: "What are you waiting for, seize him!"

The 18 disciples of the DaMo Hall stepped forward to seize Zhang JunBao. JueYuan didn't think anymore and turned a circle and the 2 iron buckets were rotating, causing the monks to back off. JueYuan threw the remaining water out of the buckets and placed Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao in the buckets. He whirled the buckets round and round like a pair of comet hammers. All the disciples of the DaMo Hall quickly moved away.

JueYuan swiftly leapt away and carried the 2 buckets with Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao away. The monks gave chase, and after awhile they lost track of them. The rules are very strict of ShaoLin and the head of the DaMo Hall gave an order to seize Zhang JunBao, so even if the monks couldn't catch up they must still pursue them. After awhile, the monks with a level in the art of levitation were still chasing while the others were falling behind. In the end, only 5 monks were still running about, and they knew even if they caught up with them, they wouldn't be a match for JueYuan and Zhang JunBao.

So they didn't have an option but to return to ShaoLin.

JueYuan ran kilometers away from the monastery and he stopped when they were in the deep end of the forest. Although JueYuan's internal energy was powerful, this running away took a heavy toll on him. He was too weak now to even put down the buckets. Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao jumped out and lifted the buckets from his shoulders.

Zhang JunBao said: "Master, rest for awhile I will look for some food."

But he couldn't find anything else but some wild strawberries. The 3 of them ate some and rested.

Guo Xiang said to JueYuan: "Reverend JueYuan, all the monks of the ShaoLin Monastery are very weird. With the exception of you and reverend WuSe."

JueYuan only murmured something. Guo Xiang continued: "You and your pupil defeated that "3 Saints of KunLun" He ZuDao. They should be thanking you and now they want to capture brother Zhang. That's ridiculous!"

JueYuan sighed: "This cannot be entirely blamed on the old abbot and Buddhist brother WuXiang. ShaoLin has a rule....."

After saying that JueYuan started coughing and couldn't catch his breath.

Guo Xiang softly padded his back and said: "You're tired, you should rest now. We shall talk about this tomorrow."

JueYuan sighed: "Yes, I'm very tired."

Zhang JunBao made a small fire to dry his and Guo Xiang's clothes and the 3 of them slept under a tree.

In the middle of the night, Guo Xiang heard JueYuan murmuring. It sounded like he was reciting sutras. So she woke up and heard: "The strength of the opponent just reaches my skin and hair, my essence penetrate the opponents bones. Raise your 2 hands and let your energy flow fluently. The left is heavy, yet empty, the right flows ever away. But the right is heavy yet the left is empty....."

Guo Xiang thought: "This isn't a Buddhist sutra, and that final part was related to martial arts theory."

JueYuan continued: "Your "qi" is like a wheel, rotating through your entire body, if not your body will be dispersed and converse. This illness is caused by waist and leg....." Guo Xiang knew for sure that he was reciting martial art theories and thought: "Reverend JueYuan didn't learn martial arts but he read almost every scripture he could find. And 3 years ago he said that in the handwritten Lankavatara sutra of Master DaMo, there was another codex namely [Jiu Yang Zheng Jing]. He thought it's purpose was to stay healthy and strong and learnt the essence from it. Both he and his pupil didn't have someone to teach them, but somehow he reached the same level as the other top martial arts experts of the realm. I could remember clearly that when Xiao XiangZi struck him, Xiao XiangZi was injured himself. I doubt that even brother Yang and my father can do something like that. And today, they managed to defeat He ZuDao, thanks to [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing]. He must be reciting that [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] at the moment." She sat up and started paying attention and remained quiet, she was afraid to disturb him. She was memorizing every word JueYuan said and thought: "If it is [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing], it must be excellent and profound. I will memorize what he says and ask him tomorrow if he can

explain it."

JueYuan recited: "...First use your heart to enable your body. Start from other people, do not start yourself. The back of your body can now start from the heart. Because you remain the same and people start first. Let your opponent attack first, and follow his movements. If he doesn't move, you don't move. If he moves a bit you move too.

Guo Xiang thought: "This is wrong, my parents always taught me that in a battle you have to strike first before being struck. Reverend JueYuan is wrong here."

Guo Xiang was confused, she was always taught to strike first, be quicker than your opponent. And JueYuan's theory was the opposite of what she learned and she thought: "In a fight you cannot really stand still and let your opponent be leading the fight."

Because of this confusion she missed a part. She saw that Zhang JunBao sat there listening carefully. Guo Xiang thought: "No matter whether he's wrong or right. This old monk was able to injure Xiao XiangZi and defeat He ZuDao, I saw this myself. So his martial arts theories must be good."

For both theories something can be said. You can't say that what Guo Jing taught Guo Xiang was wrong. It depends on the level and the user. Jiu Yang is NOT superior to Jiu Yin.

JueYuan continued to recite and sometimes he would recite a piece from the Lankavatara sutra. [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] was written inside the Lankavatara sutra. JueYuan recited some parts in Indian causing Guo Xiang to be quite confused.

Fortunately, Guo Xiang was an very intelligent girl and still managed to memorize 20-30 percent of everything.

JueYuan continued to recite, his voice became lower and unclear. Guo Xiang said: "Rest for awhile, you've been exhausted."

But JueYuan continued to recite: "... Borrow your strength from your opponent, your "qi" must be drawn from your spine. How to draw "qi" from your spine? Your "qi" lowers, and bend your shoulders to the back concentrate on your waist. This "qi" will come from above and go down. Meaning the "qi" is unified. Unifying means taking in, opening means releasing. If you understand opening and unifying, you'll understand "ying" and "yang."

After reciting to this part, JueYuan's voice softly ended and it seemed he fell into a deep sleep.

It was becoming dawn, JueYuan was still sleeping and he had a smile on his face.

Zhang JunBao raised his head and saw a grey shadow appearing from the tree. This shadow wore a yellow kasaya. He was startled and said: "Who's there?"

A tall, skinny, old monk appeared, it was the head of the LuoHan Hall reverend WuSe.

Guo Xiang was startled and happy to see him and said: "Why do keep pursuing them? Must you really capture them and bring them back to ShaoLin?"

WuSe said: "I know the difference between right and wrong. If I'm really an upholder of ancient rules and traditions I would have captured them last night and wouldn't wait till now. Brother JueYuan, brother WuXiang is leading the disciples of the DaMo Hall to the east. Quickly, go to the

west!" JueYuan was still sitting and had his eyes closed.

Zhang JunBao walked up and said: "Master wake up. The elder of the LuoHan Hall is talking to you."

JueYuan was still sitting there, Zhang JunBao became frightened and touched his face. JueYuan was cold, he passed away some time ago. Zhang JunBao was devastated and cried: "Master, master!"

But JueYuan will never wake up again.

WuSe put his palms together and recited a Buddhist scripture and left.

Zhang JunBao was crying, and Guo Xiang was crying too. When the monks of ShaoLin die, it was a custom to cremate them. So Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao collected some wood and cremated JueYuan's body.

Guo Xiang spoke to Zhang JunBao: "Brother Zhang, the ShaoLin monks will not easily let you off. You must be very careful. Our paths will now part, I hope to see again in the future."

Zhang JunBao was still crying and asked: "Miss Guo, where will you be going? Where shall I go?"

Guo Xiang felt sad after hearing his question: "I shall travel to the ends of the world if I have to. I, myself do not know where I'm going. Brother Zhang, you're still young and don't have any experience in WuLin matters. Furthermore, the ShaoLin monks are still looking for you."

She removed a golden bracelet from her wrist and gave it to Zhang JunBao and said: "Take this bracelet and go to

XiangYang to see my parents. They will treat you warmly. And if you're with my parents, those ShaoLin monks will think twice before trying to capture you."

Zhang JunBao was in tears and took the bracelet. Guo Xiang said: "Tell my parents that I'm alright and tell them not to worry.

My father likes heroic youngsters, if he sees that you're such a talented man he'll probably accept you as his pupil. My younger brother is a friendly, honest person, you will like him. But my older sister has a bad-temper, she'll scold anyone for the slightest matter and doesn't consider the feelings of other people. Just try to put up with her."

After saying that she left.

Zhang JunBao stood there and felt very lonely and thought, although the world was big there was no place for him to stay.

He stood in front of JueYuan's ashes for a very long time and then started walking away. After walking for a few metres he went back and carried his teacher's iron buckets away. In the middle of nowhere, this young, skinny man walks lonely to the west, ever so sad and lonesome.

After walking half a day, he reached the borders of the HeBei province. The city of XiangYang was not far from here and the ShaoLin monks were not be seen. This was due to reverend WuSe, he told the monks that Zhang JunBao was seen in the east so all the monks went to the east to look for him. So the farther Zhang JunBao traveled to the west, the bigger the distance he put between himself and his pursuers.

This afternoon, he reached a tall mountain. It was very green

and luxuriant, the forest was thick. And the mountain looked very majestic, on inquiry, this mountain was called WuDang.

Zhang JunBao rested on a rock nearby and saw a man and a woman walking by. They seemed to be local farmers, the 2 looked ever so intimate and it seemed that they were just newly-weds. The wife was murmuring something and she seemed to be scolding her husband. The husband lowered his head and didn't make a sound.

The wife said: "You're a grown man, why can't you support your own family? Why go to sister and brother-in-law? That scene was humiliating enough, wasn't it? We have hands and feet, we can support ourselves, even if we have to eat simple food. Just as long as we're happy and carefree."

The husband just nodded and hmmd.

The wife continued: "Besides death, there is nothing we should worry about. Do we really have to rely on others?"

The husband didn't dare to say anything back, his face was swelling up.

The words of the wife were getting through to Zhang JunBao and he thought that she was right. He stared at their backs and thought those words over and over again. Suddenly he saw the husband standing up straight and saying something. Both husband and wife laughed heartily, it seemed that the husband realised that he must take care of himself instead of relying on other people.

Zhang JunBao thought: "Miss Guo said her older sister was very bad-tempered and often scolded other people for no particular reason. She also told me to just put up with her. I'm a grown man, why should I put up with that kind of

attitude. If that husband and wife cling on to their self-respect, so should I, Zhang JunBao. Why do I have to put up with anyone's bad-temper?"

He made up his mind and carried the 2 buckets up and went up Mount WuDang. He found a cave and lived in it, living on water from springs and fruit from the forest. He started studying [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing].

Many years later, he realised something: "Master DaMo originated from India, even if he knew Chinese it would be very basic. The language of [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] is very deep and profound. It is definitely not written by foreigners. Probably some ShaoLin monk created this and used the name of Master DaMo. And this monk wrote [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] inside the Lankavatara sutra."

But this was just his deduction and he felt still somewhat puzzled by it. JueYuan taught Zhang JunBao [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] for some time, so he was able to remember 50, 60 percent of it. More than 10 years later, his internal strength reached a very high level, and he started to study Taoist manuscripts and scriptures. He managed to learn a lot from the cultivation of "qi" in these scriptures.

On one particular day, he looked up in the sky and some clouds and looked down and some the flowing water, Zhang JunBao seemed to have realised something. He went back to his cave and pondered on his discovery 7 days and 7 nights, finally he understood it completely and comprehended the martial arts theory that "gentleness can overcome fierceness." [Yi Rou Ke Gang]. He laughed to his heart's content.

This laughter produced a top martial arts master. He created a martial arts style based on Taoist theories and [Jiu Yang

Zhen Jing]. He founded the famous and glorious WuDang School.

Later when he roamed about, he saw 3 peaks reaching up into the sky. He changed his name to SanFeng and became China's martial arts mysterious master namely, Zhang SanFeng.

End of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 - Refined for a Hundred Years the Precious Saber Creates a Mysterious Light

(Translated by Meh)



When he arrives outside that room, he hears loud sound of fire, with three people standing besides a huge fireplace, with a huge saber in the middle. Those three people look to be about sixty, their faces filled with smoke. Even from afar, Yu DaiYan feels like he's burning from the fire. He can't believe that those people can stay that close. Yet despite the huge flames, that saber did not change its color to red, remaining black.

Flowers bloom, flowers wither. The young men in the martial world have become old. The young girls have begun to show their age with hair turning white.

It's has been over fifty years since the demise of the Sung dynasty.

On this third month of the new lunar year, a thirty-some year old man walks on the beach in the southern China. He wears a blue robe, a pair of grass shoes, walking quickly forward, as if in a hurry. Although surrounded by beautiful trees and flowers, he has no time to enjoy the scenery. Seeing that the sky is getting darker, he thinks, "Today is the 24th day of the third month. It's only fourteen days till 9th day of the fourth month. If I hurry, I can make it just in time for Master's ninetieth birthday."

This man is Yu DaiYan, the third disciple under the founder of Wu Dang, Zhang SanFeng. At the beginning of the year, Yu DaiYan was ordered to kill an evil, murderous outlaw. When that outlaw heard about this, he went into hiding. It took Yu DaiYan an extra two months just to find him. He then challenged the outlaw to a fight, and on the eleventh move, killed him with his Silence Illusory Saber. But by spending an extra two months, he now has to travel extra quickly to make it back in time for hiss master's birthday.

Now that he is close to the sea, he sees a wide, flat area sparkling on the beach, something he has never seen before. When he asked the locals, he chuckled after hearing the response. For these are nets used to capture seawater to make salt. Yu DaiYan thinks, "I have eaten salt for over thirty years, yet never knew how they're made."

As he continues on his journey, Yu DaiYan sees twelve people carrying some bags on their shoulders, walking quickly. From the look of things, they're all carrying salt. But this is more than two hundred pounds of salt each person's carrying. Since corrupt officials like to hoard salts, it's rare for commoners to be able to buy them through legitimate means. Salt smugglers are quite common in this area. Yu DaiYan thinks, "Wow, looks like salt smuggling is very important here. These people's kung fu skills are quite good." If it had been some other time, he would've wanted to take a closer look. But he can't possibly miss his master's birthday, so he ignores them. By nightfall he arrives at a small town, and settles down in the inn there.

After eating the dinner and finishes washing his feet, Yu DaiYan sees that those twelve salt smugglers also came into this inn. He ignores them, and begins to meditate using Wu Dang's inner power. After three repetitions, he lies down and falls asleep.

At midnight, Yu DaiYan suddenly hears much noise coming from outside. He immediately gets up, only to hear someone say, "Let's leave quietly. We don't want to wake up our neighbor." The rest of them open the door quietly and moves quickly outside. Yu DaiYan thinks, "They must be up to something bad to walk around at this hour. I can't ignore this. If I save some innocent people, then it would be ok even if I miss master's birthday," He wraps his saber in a cloth and jumps out the window.

With footsteps as his guide, Yu DaiYan follows secretly, utilizing his lightness kung fu. There is almost no moonlight, but he can still see those twelve people running quickly in the darkness. He thinks, "With their kung fu skills, these people can easily go rob rich land owners or officials. Why do they need to settle for salt smuggling? There's something fishy going on." With his great lightness kung fu, Yu DaiYan manages to follow the twelve people without a sound.

After following for about an hour, they arrived at a beach. Suddenly, he hears a croaked whisper, "Are the 'three water-dotted'* friends here?" The leader of the twelve men responds, "Yes. And you are?" Yu DaiYan ponders, "Who could these 'three water-dotted' people be?" He suddenly remembers, "Of course, it's the Sea Sand sect. These three characters are all begin with three water dots." Only to hear the croaked person say, "In my opinion, you're better off staying away from the Dragon Saber. The leader says, "Are you here for the Dragon Saber too?" His voice carries a tinge of disbelief. The croaked man starts to laugh sinisterly, but does not respond.

*Note: Three water dots is a term used to describe a particular left side of many Chinese characters. Usually characters with the three water dots have to do with water.

Yu DaiYan moved up to get a better view, only to see that it's a white-robed man blocking their path. Anyone who dares to wear white in the middle of the night must be extremely confident of his kung fu. That white-robed man laughs again, while the group leader yells, "Get out of our way. Unless you want to die..." Before he finished, a person suddenly yells out in pain, "Ahhhh!" and falls on the ground, dead. The white-robed man then quickly flies away.

Some members of the Sea Sand Sect want to chase after him, but they don't know which way he went. Yu DaiYan ponders, "This man's speed is incredible. He seemingly just used Shaolin's 'Golden Steel Claws', but I can't be sure in this darkness. From his voice, it seems like he's from the northwestern part of China. What is he doing here?" He then hears the leader say, "Put down fourth brother. We'll come back for him afterwards." The rest of the members then continue on their path.

Yu DaiYan jumps out and examines the body, seeing two small holes on the person's neck, made obviously by two fingers. He feels that there must be something important going on, and quickens his pace, following the Sea Sand Sect members.

After a while, those people begin to split up, surrounding a house. Yu DaiYan wonders, "Is that Dragon Saber they're talking about in this house?" He then sees the people outside begin to pour salt around the house, and thinks, "Why are they pouring salt around this place? Wait till I tell this to my brothers. I bet there's no way they'd believe me." But then he sees that these people pour salt in a very cautious manner, as if afraid that the salt will touch them. Yu DaiYan immediately realizes what is going on. There must be poison within the salt. He's not certain whether the people inside are good or bad, but figures that he needs to warn them regardless. In an instant, he flew towards the house.

There are many rooms in this house. But he sees that smoke is coming out of one of the rooms, so he figures that there must be someone there. When he arrives outside that room, he hears loud sound of fire, with three people standing besides a huge fireplace, with a huge saber in the middle. Those three people look to be about sixty, their faces filled with smoke. Even from afar, Yu DaiYan feels like he's burning

from the fire. He can't believe that those people can stay that close. Yet despite the huge flames, that sword did not change its color to red, remaining black.

At this moment, he hears a croaked voice, "How dare you to mess with a precious saber. Get away from it!" Yu DaiYan realizes that it's the white-robed man's voice. Those three people ignore the warning, and continue to work on the saber. Only to hear a chuckle coming from the roof as the white-robed man dashed in. He looks around forty, with a pale white face. He says in a cold voice, "Long White Elders, I don't blame you for trying to get the saber. But why try to destroy it with this fire?"

One of the three men walks up, picks up a shovel, and attacks the white-robed man. The white-robed man evades to the side, and then counters with fingers in a claw shape, dancing up and down with a huge force. Yu DaiYan sees that his moves look like it's from Shaolin on the surface, but is more aggressive and venomous, certainly not as righteous as Shaolin's kung fu.

After a while, that old man with the shovel yells, "Who are you? You should at least leave your name." The white-robed man chuckles again, his hands shot out, breaking the wrists of the old man. The second old man immediately grabs the saber out from the fire, while the third man shot takes out a dart, waiting for a chance to use it on the white-robed man. But the white-robed man is too fast.

At this time, one can see smoke coming out of the second old man's hands. It's obvious that his hand is burning; yet for some reason, he does not let go of the saber. As he runs out of the hut, the white-robed man yells, "Do you really think you can get away?" Raising his eyebrows a bit, he quickly flies over to the second old man, picks him up, and throws

him into the fire.

Yu DaiYan originally didn't plan on helping either side, but with someone's life in danger, he felt that he needed to help out. He jumps out of his hiding place and pushed the old man lightly while spinning in midair, then floated down to the floor. The Long White Elders and the white-robed man had long known that he was outside, but no one cared. So they can't help but feel an incredible shock when Yu DaiYan displayed such a skillful lightness kung fu. The white-robed man says, "Is this the famous 'Cloud Stairs'?" Yu DaiYan first feels a bit of shock that this man knows of his kung fu, but then feels happy, knowing that his Wu Dang kung fu is so famous. He says, "This plain kung fu is nothing to brag about. May I ask who you are?" That white-robed man says, "Very nice. Wu Dang's kung fu really is fairly decent."

Despite being a bit angry at his words, Yu DaiYang does not show it. Instead he says, "The power you displayed while killing that member of the Sea Sand Sect is quite amazing too. I can't even tell what kind it is." The white-robed man wonders, "He saw that? I wonder where he was hiding at the time. How come I didn't sense him?" He says, "Of course you couldn't tell. Not even your old man Zhang can figure it out."

Yu DaiYan felt greatly annoyed at this ridicule of his own master. But Wu Dang students are all taught to be calm and peaceful. He thinks, "This person is purposely trying to make me mad. There's no reason for Wu Dang to add another powerful enemy." He says, "There are thousands of kung fus in this world, both righteous ones and evil ones. Wu Dang's kung fu only came from one source. Your skills look like it's from Shaolin, but at the same time seems different." That white-robed man's expression changes a bit, as if flustered by this comment.

While they are talking, the second old man with the saber suddenly lashes out. Yu DaiYan quickly dodges the blow, while seeing the old man aimlessly slashes left and right, as if he has gone crazy. The white-robed man and the other two old men realize the power of the saber, and do not try to block him. As the old man runs out of the house, he suddenly trips, falling on the ground and begins to scream in agony.

The other two old men and the white-robed man immediately reaches out to grab the saber, but they all fell down once they reaches outside. The two old men start to roll around on the ground screaming, while the white-robed man simply flips up, and flies away.

Yu DaiYan wants to immediately go save those three people, but then remembers the scene of salt being spread. He realizes that the whole area has been poisoned. Looking around, he sees some stools. Quickly, he threw a couple outside, then jumps on to them. With some clothing wrapped around his hand, he quickly picks up the old man with the saber. Only to see over ten darts coming from the surrounding Sea Sand sect members.

Yu DaiYan bounces up from the stools, dodging the darts. He then flipped the stools forward with his feet, allowing him to step-by-step jump out of the salted area. Once outside, he immediately opens up his lightness kung fu to quickly run away from the Sea Sand sect members.

Yu DaiYan realizes that he must first get rid of the poison from this old man. So he quickly runs to the beach, and throws the old man into the water to cleanse him. Once cleansed, Yu DaiYan says, "Your life is no longer in danger. Since I have other businesses to take care of, I shall take leave of you." That old man asks, "Why don't you take my saber?" Yu DaiYan says, "Although that's a great saber, it's not mine.

Why should I take it?" That person says, "What are you up to? How are you going to torture me?" Yu DaiYan says, "I don't even know you. Why would I want to torture you? I just wanted to save you because your life was in danger." That old man doesn't believe him, instead yelling, "Just kill me and get it over with. But be warned that even as a ghost I will haunt you." Yu DaiYan simply smiles a bit, thinking that this old man must be a little crazy from the poison. Just as he's about to leave, a wave came from the sea, carrying the old man into the waters.

Yu DaiYan realizes that there are still poisons left in this old man's body. If he doesn't help him recover, this old man will die. Therefore he carried the old man, until they reached an empty building. Looking up, he sees that it's a temple, called 'Sea God Temple'. He put the old man by a statue. Then lights up a candle. When he looks at the old man again, he sees that the poison has spread all over the body. Yu DaiYan takes out a 'Heaven Heart Antidote' from his pocket and says, "Take this pill."

That old man says, "I'm not going to eat your poisoned pills." Despite his peaceful attitude, Yu DaiYan can't help but be angry at those remarks. He says, "Do you know who I am? Do you think a Wu Dang disciple would do such a thing as using poison? This pill is to help ease the poison in you. Although it might not cure the poison totally, it can at least prolong your life for three days. I suggest you give this saber to the Sea Sand Sect in return for its antidote."

That old man jumps up and yells, "I can't give up my Dragon Saber." Yu DaiYan says, "What's the use of this saber if you're going to die?" The old man responds, "I'd rather die than give up this saber." As he says this, he clutches the saber tightly, then swallows Yu DaiYan's pill.

His words raised Yu DaiYan's curiosity. He wants to ask just what's so great about this saber, but decided not to after he sees the obsessive, angry look on the old man's face. Feeling repulsed, Yu DaiYan stands up to leave. That old man yells, "Hold on! Where are you going?" Yu DaiYan smiles and says, "What's it to you?" and begins to leave.

The old man begins to cry after he walks a few steps. Yu DaiYan turns around and asks, "Why are you crying?" The old man says, "I spent so much effort just to obtain this saber, yet now I'm going to die. What's the use of this saber now?" Yu DaiYan let out a 'Humph', and says, "The only thing you can do now is to exchange the saber for the antidote." That old man cries, "But I don't want to. I don't want to." Yu DaiYan wants to laugh at his words, but can't do so. After a while, he says, "The whole point of learning martial arts is help the defenseless and defeat the evils of the world, setting a good example for the later generations. Precious sabers and swords are simply items. Hardly something worth your life." The old man says, " 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying*, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow!' Have you heard this phrase?"

*Note: The proper translation of the 'Dragon Saber' is the 'Dragon Slaying Saber'. However, I will use the more popular(and shorter :P) translation, 'Dragon Saber', that TVB came up.

Yu DaiYan chuckles and says, "Of course I've heard it. There are two more phrases after this, something like 'Power of heaven* not appear, Who can possibly compete?' That's just to describe an event many years ago, not really some saber." That old man asks, "What event?"

*Note: 'Power of heaven' here is used to described the name of the Heaven Sword. Actually, a proper description of those

two characters is 'reliance on heaven', but that wouldn't sound as good. The sword's is therefore more aptly translated as 'the sword that relies on the power of the heavens'. But for this translation, it will be shortened to Heaven Saber, just to match up with the name that TVB came up with.

Yu DaiYan says, "That's because the Legendary Condor Hero Yang Guo once killed the Mongol emperor, which greatly helped us Hans. So whenever Hero Yang asks of something, 'None dares to not listen'. The 'dragon' is here is obviously the emperor, 'dragon slaying' means to kill the emperor. Do you really think there are such things as dragons in this world?"

That old man smiles coldly, asking, "Do you know what weapon he used during that battle?" Yu DaiYan thinks for a moment, then responds, "I heard the master say that Hero Yang was missing an arm. So he normally doesn't carry any weapon." That old man asks, "So how did he kill the emperor?" Yu DaiYan says, "He used a pebble. Everyone knows that." The old man says with a smile, "In that case, where does this whole 'saber' thing come from?"

Yu DaiYan can't find the answer. After a while, he finally says, "Probably because it's made up by others. I mean, 'Little pebble dragon slaying' doesn't sound nearly as nice." That old man says, "You're just making it up. How about this, can you explain the meaning of 'Power of heaven not appear, Who can possibly compete'?" Yu DaiYan says, "I don't know. Perhaps it's to describe his wife. Maybe his wife's name is the 'power of heaven'. Or he might have meant Guo Jing, Hero Guo."

That old man says, "Really? I know you can't explain it. Let me tell you. 'Dragon Slaying' is a saber. It's this Dragon Saber I have. The 'Power of Heaven' is a sword, the Heaven Sword.

This poem means that whoever has the Dragon Saber can rule the world. As long as the Heaven Sword does not appear, no one can compete with the Dragon Saber.”

Yu DaiYan doesn't know whether to believe or not, and says, “Let me look at it, and see just what's so powerful about this saber.” That old man tightly clutches the Dragon Saber, says, “You think I'm a kid? Trying to take my saber, eh?” He just recovered a bit after taking the pill Yu DaiYan gave him. Yet by spending too much energy clutching the saber, he begins to have trouble breathing. Yu DaiYan chuckles, and says, “If you don't want me to see it, then so be it. Besides, whom are you going to control anyway? Are you telling me that I'm going to listen to your orders because of this saber? You must be kidding. You were a normal person. But after listening to such a stupid rumor, you've now nearly lost your life. It's obvious that this saber has no special powers.”

That old man stays silent for a while, then says, “Hey, let's make a deal. You help save my life, and I'll give you half of this saber's powers.” Yu DaiYan laughs, and says, “Is that how you think of us Wu Dang sect? We don't help others for any rewards. Besides, I don't have the antidote to your poison. You still have to ask the Sea Sand sect for it.” That old man says, “I stole this saber from them. Why would they save me?” Yu DaiYan says, “If you give them back their saber, why would they care to kill you?”

That old man says, “Your kung fu is incredible. I'm sure you can steal some from them.” Yu DaiYan says, “First, I have something important to do, and don't have time for such a thing. Besides, you stole their saber. So it's your fault to begin with. Why should I help you steal the antidote? Old man, I suggest you hurry and go ask for the antidote now, before it's too late.”

Seeing that he's about to leave, that old man says in a hurry, "Ok. Let me ask you something else. How did you feel when you carried me?" Yu DaiYan says, "I thought it was kind of strange. You look small and skinny, yet you seemingly weigh over two hundred pounds. But I'm not sure why."

That old man put down the Dragon Saber, and says, "Now lift me." Yu DaiYan picks him up, and feels like he's only lifting about eighty pounds of weight. He thinks, "Wow, this saber is over a hundred pounds. That is quite strange." After putting the old man back down again, he says, "This saber is pretty heavy."

The old man asks, "Is your surname Yu or Zhang?" Yu DaiYan says, "My name is Yu DaiYan. How do you know?" The old man says, "I know that First Hero Song is over forty years old. Your sixth and seventh brother Yin and Muo are still less than twenty. The rest of the four Wu Dang heroes all have surnames of Yu or Zhang. Everyone knows that. I'm grateful to meet the great Third Hero Yu today." Although he's fairly young, Yu DaiYan is quite experienced in the ways of the martial world. He knows that this old man only says such praises because he wants a favor. With a feeling of repulsiveness, he says, "And you are?" The old man says, "My name is De Cheng. Everyone calls me Hai Dong Qing." Hai Dong Qing is a type of eagle, famous for its viciousness and predatory skills. Yu DaiYan says, "Nice to meet you." Then proceeds to look up at the sky, trying to figure out the time.

The old man realizes that he needs to try some other trick for this person to help him. So he says, "You don't realize the meaning behind these words, they're..." When he says this, Yu DaiYan's expression suddenly changes changes. He immediately blows out the candle and whispers, "Someone's here."

De Cheng's inner power is not nearly as good as Yu DaiYan, so he did not notice anything. Only after a while does he hear footsteps coming from the front. He says, "Let's sneak out the back." Yu DaiYan says, "They have people in the back too. Besides, it's the Sea Sand Sect. This is your opportunity to exchange for the antidote." The old man clutches onto him tightly, yells, "Third Hero Yu, you can't leave me. You can't..."

At this time, someone kicked down the door as Yu DaiYan quickly hides behind a Buddha statue. When De Cheng let out a small 'ah' sound, tens of darts came out straight at him, prompting him to fall down. Only to hear more sounds of hidden weapons being released, all containing the poisoned salts. After a while, Yu DaiYan hears the roof shaking, as salt begins to pour down through the cracks. Realizing that the salts will eventually touch him, Yu DaiYan quickly smashes a hole into the Buddha next to him, and crawls into the hole.

Yu DaiYan then hears someone in the Sea Sand sect says, "There are no more sounds. They're probably all unconscious." Another person says, "That youngster's footsteps are very light. It's better to wait a while longer." "I'm just afraid that he may have escaped." Then someone yells loudly, "Get out of here and surrender."

At this moment Yu DaiYan hears many horses gallop on the outside. Then someone from outside yells, "The sun and moon's lights shine, the Eagle King spreads its wings." This made the Sea Sand sect quiet. After a while, someone yells, "It's the Heavenly Eagle sect. Let's get out of here." When he finishes, the galloping sounds stopped. Then someone whispers, "Too late."

Several people then enter the temple. One person asks, "Do you know who we are?" Several members of the Sea Sand Sect answers, "Yes. You are friends from the Heavenly Eagle

sect.” That person says, “This is Heaven City Branch’s Leader Li of our Heavenly Eagle sect. You’re lucky to see him today. Leader Li asks you where the Dragon Saber is. If you’re nice enough to answer correctly, he just might be kind enough to let you keep your life.” Only to hear a Sea Sand member points to De Cheng, and says, “He... he took it. We’re just about to take it back.”

That person from the Heavenly Eagle asks De Cheng, “Where is it?” De Cheng does not respond, instead simply falls to the ground.

That person from the Heavenly Eagle says, “Search him.” Yu DaiYan hears some people making ruffling noises, and then someone saying, “This person has nothing on him.” The leader of the Sea Sand group says, “But... but it really is him who stole the Dragon Saber. We...” Yu DaiYan wonders, “Wait a minute. Where did the Dragon Saber go? Didn’t De Cheng have it on him?”

This Branch Leader Li does not say anything, but his subordinate says, “If you want to stay alive, then tell the truth.” After a moment of silence, someone begins to yell, “You came right after we entered the temple. How could we have time to grab the saber beforehand? If you don’t believe us, then we’re going to die anyway. So we might as well go down fighting. You bunch of bullies, we...” He suddenly stops talking, obviously dead. Another person says, “I saw a middle-aged man with pretty good lightness kung fu with him. I bet that man has it, and escaped.” Branch Leader Li says, “Search them.” Yu DaiYan again hears ruffling sounds, and then hears Branch Leader Li says, “He’s probably right. Let’s go search for that man.”

Yu DaiYan wants to wait till the Sea Sand people left too before getting out. But after a long time, he still could not

hear any footsteps. He takes a peek outside, only to see the members of the Sea Sand sect standing still, as if their pressure points have been sealed.

He jumps out, takes a torch, and begins to examine their faces, only to see their faces gray and without life. He wonders, "Who are these Heavenly Eagle people anyway? How come I've never heard of them? They're obviously quite powerful, or these people won't be so afraid of them. Humph, they certainly deserve their fate." He then goes over and pushes the Hua Meng Point of one of the person to unseal his pressure point. Yet the person still remains still. Yu DaiYan then puts his finger by that person's nose, and realizes that this person's dead already. He thinks, "Wow. They could seal their Death points without making any sound. That is a very evil kung fu indeed." But seeing how these people are very powerful, and he's just by himself, Yu DaiYan knows that he can't fight them. He decides to report this to his master, and have him choose how to handle the Heavenly Eagle sect.

Seeing poisoned salt all around him, Yu DaiYan decides to burn this place and the surrounding area, so no innocents will be killed. As he went out, he sees a strange body. Yu DaiYan then picks it up to examine further. He finds that the body is very heavy. From a hole in the back, he pulls out the Dragon Saber. Apparently, De Cheng hid the Dragon Saber into one of the Sea Sand members before dying. The Heavenly Eagle sect people must not have noticed as they checked the bodies.

Yu DaiYan thinks, "This saber has caused many problems in the world. I really should give it to the master, so he can decide what to do with it." With a throw of his torch, he burns down the temple.

As the fire is burning, Yu DaiYan examines the saber closely.

He finds that the saber doesn't look like it's made of iron or gold, and can't figure out just what kind of metal it's made of. The fact that it can withstand so much heat is also quite strange. He thinks, "How can one use this sword in battle considering that it's so heavy?"

Yu DaiYan then wraps up the saber and puts it on the back of his shoulders, then continues on his journey. After an hour or so, he arrives at the edge of a river. Seeing a flicker of fire on the river from afar, he yells, "Can I get a ride across the river?" The person on the boat didn't seem to hear. So he yells again, this time with his inner power. The boat then quickly comes over. When it reaches the edge, someone on the boat yells, "Do you want to go across the river?" Yu DaiYan says happily, "Yes. Thank your." That fisherman says, "Then get on."

As he steps onto the boat, it immediately sinks down a bit. That fisherman asks with surprise, "What are you carrying that's so heavy?" Yu DaiYan says, "Oh, nothing. I'm just a heavy person, that's all."

When they reach the middle of the river, he suddenly sees a big boat coming over. An eagle flag appears in the front. Yu DaiYan immediately remembers the Heavenly Eagle sect, and begins to prepare himself for any danger.

Suddenly, the fisherman jumps into the water and quickly swims away. Yu DaiYan is left on his own, as the big ship rams into his small boat. Seeing that the boat is about to sink, Yu DaiYan jumps onto the big ship using his 'Cloud Stairs' lightness kung fu.

On the big ship, he looks around, seeing no one. An iron chain locks the door to the main cabin. He quickly breaks it down with his palm, and enters the cabin.

Only to hear someone inside say, "Third Hero Yu of Wu Dang. Great 'Cloud Stairs' and 'Mountain Cracking Palm' you just displayed. Leave your Dragon Saber with me, and I'll safely take you across the river." Yu DaiYan thinks, "How does he know who I am?" That person then says, "You must be wondering how I know your identity. It's quite easy, actually. Other than the top fighters of Wu Dang, no one can utilize those two moves with such gracefulness."

Yu DaiYan says, "Can I meet you? And what about your name?" That person says, "We Heavenly Eagle sect is neither friend nor foe of Wu Dang. No need for such pleasantries. Just leave your Dragon Saber here, and I'll take you across safely." Yu DaiYan says, "Is this saber yours?" That person says, "No. But whoever has it can control the martial world. Who wouldn't want it?" Yu DaiYan says, "If it's not yours, then there's no need for me to give it to you." That person then says something else. But Yu DaiYan can't hear. He steps a bit closer, asking, "What did you say?"

Suddenly, a large wave rocks the boat. As he's regaining his balance, Yu DaiYan felt as if being bitten by mosquitoes on the leg and chest. He does not take notice, instead says, "You have killed ruthlessly for this saber. I don't like your way of doing things." That person says, "We are always ruthless towards those who are evil, but we are kind towards those who are good. As long as Hero Yu leaves the Dragon Saber, I will give you the antidote for the 'Mosquito Needle'."

When he hears the words 'Mosquito Needle', Yu DaiYan immediately reaches for the places where he thought he was bitten by mosquitoes. He instantly feels weak and numb. Then Yu DaiYan realizes, "He tricked me to get closer to him, so he could have a chance to hit me with these needles. Looks like the only way to get the antidote is to grab him."

He takes a deep breath, and rushes forward.

His right palm shoots out, matching the palm of the other person. This palm contains all his power, and sent the other person backward. However, he also feels a bit of pain on his palm after that exchange. For his opponent once again deceives him, by coating his palm with a type of hidden weapon, one that poisoned Yu DaiYan as they matched palms. After coughing a bit, that person says, "Your power really is amazing. But my 'Seven Star Needle' is also quite deadly. Looks like it's a tie."

Yu DaiYan quickly takes a 'Heaven Heart Antidote', but realizes that this can only delay the effects of the poison. He then tries to attack the enemy with his saber, but his attacks were easily parried.

Then he heard that person say, "Do you want your life or the saber?" Yu DaiYan says, "Fine. I'll give it to you." And throws the saber down. That person happily picks up the saber and begins to examine it. Yu DaiYan says, "Now where's my antidote?" That person laughs, "You really are stupid. Why did you give me the saber before I gave you the antidote?" Yu DaiYan says, "A man should remain true to his words. You promised me the antidote." That person says, "When you had the saber, I was afraid of you. After all, even if you can't beat me, at least you may throw the saber away. But now that I have saber, why should I still care about you?"

Yu DaiYan feels much rage coming up from his chest, thinking that Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect has never had problems before, plus this person's kung fu is quite powerful in the martial world. Why would he not keep his word? Yu DaiYan normally is quite hard to trick. But in such an unusual place, after getting poisoned twice, his mind obviously did not work as well. After gathering himself, Yu DaiYan asks,

“May I ask your name?”

That person says, “I’m just a nobody in the Heavenly Eagle sect. If Wu Dang wants to take revenge, then obviously they should look for our leader. Besides, I Doubt Zhang SanFeng can figure out who killed you anyway.” Yu DaiYan could only feel as if his hands are being bitten by thousands of ants, thinks, “Even though I die today, I’ll take you with me.” With a scream, he rushes up and attacks with his right palm. That person instinctively tries to block with the Dragon Saber, but forgot that the saber is extremely heavy. Instead of blocking, it actually pulled down his body. In a few seconds, Yu DaiYan’s palm lands on his chest, pushing him into the water.

Yu DaiYan thinks, “Although you have obtained your precious saber, but now you’ve died along with it.” Suddenly, he sees a white rope thrown down into the water, grabbing the waist of that person. Only to see a skinny green-robed person on the edge of the ship, pulling on the rope. Unfortunately, by this time, the poison has taken over his body, and he passes out.

When Yu DaiYan regained consciousness, he sees a small flag in a vase by the side, the flag shows a small fish swimming against the current. He thinks, “This must be Lin An city’s Dragon Gate Escort Agency. What happened to me?” His mind is still muddy, so he does not try to think any more. He only feels as if someone’s carrying him on a stretcher, into the middle of a big hall. When he tried to move, he realizes that he can’t.

Only to hear two people converse, the first person in a booming voice, says, “You are?” The other person says, “Don’t bother asking. I just want to know if you’re going to take this delivery.” Yu DaiYan thinks, “This second voice has a high pitch. It’s seemingly that of a woman!”

The man with the booming voice says, "You think we don't have enough business here? If you won't give me your name, then you can take your business elsewhere." The person with the woman's voice says, "But the Dragon Gate Escort Agency is the only decent one around. I don't care for the others. However, if you can't make a decision, get your boss out here." The man with the booming voice says in an irritated voice, "I'm the boss. And right now, I have some other business to attend to. Please leave."

That person with the woman's voice says, "Oh... so you're Multi-Armed Bear Du Dajin..." After a pause, continues, "Escort Leader Du, nice to meet you. My surname is Yin." Du Dajin feels a little better with her praise, and says, "What do you need?" The customer named Yin says, "I need to first make sure that you can handle my delivery. Because it's very important."

Du Dajin says angrily, "I've delivered types of treasure in my twenty years here. Never have there been any problems." Yu DaiYan has also heard of this person, knows that he's a non-monk disciple of Shaolin. Du Dajin is proficient with both the fist and the saber, but he's most famous for his steel darts. He can simultaneously fire forty-nine darts at the same time, which is how he got the nickname 'Multi-Armed Bear'. It's just that Shaolin and Wu Dang are not really close, which is why they have not yet met each other.

The person named Yin says, "If it weren't for your fame, why would I come? I have a delivery for you to make, and it comes with three conditions."

Du Dajin says, "We don't accept any deliveries that require too much hassle. We don't accept any deliveries we don't know the background of. We don't accept any deliveries

that's worth less than fifty thousand taels of silver." He didn't listen to the customer's three conditions, and instead named three conditions of his own.

That person named Yin says, "I'm sorry. But by my delivery will require some hassle. Its background is also quite muddy. As for its worth, well, that's hard to say. Plus I also have three conditions. One, you must personally lead the escort. Two, you must take the package to the Xiang Yang city without any rest, so it will arrive in ten days. Three, should there be any problems, humph, I will kill every single person in your Dragon Gate Escort Agency."

Only to hear a loud 'Peng!' sound, which must be Du Dajin hitting the table, who yells, "Had you want to ridicule someone, you should not have picked my Dragon Gate Escort Agency. If it weren't for the fact that you look way too small and skinny, I would pummel you right here!"

The person named Yin chuckles, and then throws something heavy on the table, says, "This is two thousand taels of gold. It's the fee for this delivery." Yu DaiYan thinks in shock, "What? That's tens of thousands taels of silver. Normally it takes several years to make this much money for an escort agency." Only to hear Du Dajin breathing heavily, obviously staring at such amazing amount of wealth. After a while, he says, "Mr. Yin, what would you like us to escort?"

That person named Yin says, "First tell me if you're going to agree to my three conditions." Du Dajin says, "Since you are offering so much money, I'll risk my life this time to make sure it safely arrives. So where are the items you want to deliver?" That person named Yin says, "The package I want you to deliver is the gentleman on this stretcher." This really surprised Du Dajin and especially Yu DaiYan himself. Yu DaiYan can't help but yell, "Me...me...?" Yet for some reason,

no words can leave his mouth no matter how hard he tries. Only to hear Du Dajin say, "This... this person?"

That person named Yin says, "Correct. You can change horses and carriages along the way, but not the people escorting. In ten days, you must deliver this person to the master of Wu Dang, the Venerable Zhang SanFeng." Du Dajin says, "Wu Dang sect? The problem is, Shaolin and Wu Dang are not very... how can I say this..." That person named Yin says, "This person is gravely injured. So it's imperative that he's delivered as soon as possible. What's with the indecisiveness? Are you going to accept this deal or not?" Du Dajin says, "Fine. We'll accept it."

That person named Yin chuckles and says, "Good! Today's the 29th day of the third month. If he's not safely at Wu Dang Mountain by the 9th of next month, I'll make sure that no one in this escort agency will remain alive!" only to hear several 'swoosh' sounds, as several needles shot out, destroying all vases holding the agency's flags in all parts of the room. Even Du Dajin let out a shocking 'ahhh'. The person named Yin then yells, "Let's go", and leaves with the people carrying the stretcher.

After that person left, Du Dajin gathers himself and walks up to Yu DaiYan, asks, "Are you a member of the Wu Dang sect?" Yu DaiYan can't answer, but can see that this gentleman looks very muscular and strong, thinking his outer fighting skills must be quite formidable. Du Dajin asks again, "I never would've thought that this small, scholarly person has such incredible kung fu. Do you know which sect he belongs to?" Yu DaiYan closes his eyes and ignores him.

Du Dajin's name is quite sound, and his forte is with hidden weapons. Yet he couldn't possibly destroy tens of vases using paper-thin needles. Besides, he has never seen anything

quite so strange as someone giving two thousands taels of gold to deliver a live person. Du Dajin wraps up the gold and orders his servants to take Yu DaiYan to the guest room. He then gathers up his best men and prepares for the trip. By nightfall, they left the escort agency.

While in the carriage, Yu DaiYan thinks, "After wandering in the martial world for so many years, I've never cared much for escort agencies. Who would've thought that they would be the people in charge of my life right now?" He then thinks, "I wonder who this friend named Yin is. She sounds like a woman. That Du Dajin says she's very scholarly, yet her kung fu is certainly very good, and her way of doing things really is quite extraordinary. Too bad I didn't get to see her, or say thanks. If we ever meet again, I'll make sure to repay her kindness."

A row of horses quickly moves west. Other than leaders Du, Zhu, and Shi, everyone else is a young, energetic lad. They all picked the best horses, and changed them frequently on the road, just as their customer Yin ordered. When he left the escort agency, Du Dajin expected many people to block their paths. Yet for some reason, their trip was very smooth. In nine days, they're already at the bottom of the Wu Dang Mountain. Although it's been a long, arduous journey, everyone is glad that they're not going to miss the ten-day deadline.

Du Dajin says, "Brother Zhu, these past years the Wu Dang sect's name has become quite sound. Although still not as sound as us Shaolin, but quite famous nonetheless. Look at the steepness of the mountain. You know the saying that the environment makes the person. Perhaps they really are quite good." Sub-leader Zhu says, "But these rumors of their accomplishments aren't reliable. Besides, they've only been around for a few years. How can they possibly compete with

us Shaolin?" Sub-leader Shi says, "He's right. We've never really seen their kung fu. Compared to us, they're probably nothing."

After traveling some more, sub-leader Zhu asks, "What are we going to say to Zhang SanFeng when we see him?" Du Dajin says, "Although we're from a different sect, he is after all almost ninety. So it doesn't matter if we go up and kowtow a few times." As they're talking, Du Dajin wonders, "Who is this person inside? Is he a Wu Dang disciple, a friend of Wu Dang, or an enemy?"

While he's thinking, six people on horsebacks surrounded their group. Du Dajin thinks, "Could we possibly have problems now that we're under the Wu Dang Mountain?" He whispers to sub-leader Zhu, "Watch the main carriage." Then he went up to meet the strangers, says, "This is the Dragon Gate Escort Agency in the city of Lin An. Sorry we did not send a greeting beforehand."

Du Dajin sees that two of the people dressed as Taoists while the other four have on normal clothing. They all look very composed and gallant, with weapons attached to their sides. Du Dajin wonders, "Could this be six of the seven Wu Dang heroes?" He says, "May I ask who your names are?"

A person with a large birthmark on the face responds coldly, "What are you doing on Wu Dang Mountain?" Du Dajin says, "We're here to send a injured person to your master, Venerable Zhang SanFeng." That person asks, "Who is the injured person?" Du Dajin says, "I don't know. A person named Yin asked me to make this delivery. I know of nothing else. We don't ask our customers for their reasons." That person says, "A customer named Yin? What kind of person is he?" Du Dajin says, "He's a handsome and scholarly fellow, whose projectile weapon skills are incredible." That person

then asks, "So you've fought him?" Du Dajin says, "No. No. He just..." Before he could finish, a short person among the strangers cut him off, asks, "Where the Dragon Saber?"

Du Dajin says in bewilderment, "What Dragon Saber? Is it the mythical one everyone's talking about?" That short guy immediately goes up to the carriage and looks inside. Du Dajin looks at his lightness kung fu, thinking, "This resembles Shaolin's kung fu. Humph. Wu Dang claims that their kung fu skills are unique, but looks like they still cannot deviate from their Shaolin roots." Now that he's certain these are Wu Dang disciples, Du Dajin says, "Are you the famous Wu Dang heroes? Who is First Hero Song?" The man with the birthmark says, "Oh, you're too flattering."

The short man says, "His injury is severe. Let's get him back quickly." That man with the birthmark says to Du Dajin, "Thank you for escorting our friend here." Du Dajin says, "You are welcome." That person then says, "He needs to see our master quickly. We'll take it from here." Du Dajin says, "Sure. In that case, I'll give him to you." That person says, "Thank you." and throws a gold nugget at Du Dajin. "Just a little reward for you." As he says this, those six people left with the carriage.

Du Dajin looks at the nugget, and finds five fingerprints on it. He thinks, "Wow. These Wu Dang heroes really do possess some great kung fu. I bet only my martial uncles who knows the 'Golden Steel Finger' can make such a mark." Sub-leader Zhu says, "These Wu Dang people really are arrogant. We spent all this time coming here, and they don't even ask us to go up for a rest."

Du Dajin has the same feelings, except he didn't bother to say it. Instead he says, "Well, at least we save some time. Besides, it would be awkward for us Shaolin disciples to visit

Wu Dang. Let's just leave."

On their way back, Du Dajin feels more and more unsettled, seeing how the Wu Dang heroes didn't even bother to leave their name. But everyone else feels only joy, knowing that they just made a ton of money, since Du Dajin has always been extravagant when splitting their earnings.

As they continued on their journey, a person on a fast galloping horse suddenly passed them from behind. Du Dajin sees that it's a youngster of about twenty-one or twenty-two. He looks scholarly and charismatic, and as he passed said, "Thanks for letting me pass." When he left, Du Dajin asks, "Brother Zhu, who do you think this is?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "He came from Wu Dang Mountain, so he's probably a Wu Dang disciple. But he doesn't have any weapons, and looks to scrawny too to be a kung fu expert."

When he finished, that youngster suddenly came back, and asks, "May I ask a question?" Du Dajin says, "What do you need to know?" That youngster looks at the flag and says, "Are you the Dragon Gate Escort Agency?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "Yes!" That youngster says, "May I ask who everyone is? And how is your Head Leader Du?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "My surname is Zhu. What's your name? Are you a friend of our head leader?"

That youngster gets off the horse and steps forward a bit, says, "My name is Zhang CuiShan. I've heard of the famous Dragon Gate Escort Agency." When he said this, Du Dajin felt a huge shock, thinking how could the famous Fifth Hero Zhang be a young scholar? He says, "I am Du Dajin. So you are the person everyone calls 'Silver Hook and Iron Brush' Fifth Hero Zhang?" That youngster says with a smile, "I don't think I'm worthy of the 'hero' title. But since you're here at Wu Dang Mountain, how about going up for a visit. Today is

my master's ninetieth birthday. If you don't have anything important to do, we would appreciate your company."

Du Dajin sees that he's quite sincere, and wonders, "How come the Wu Dang heroes differ so much in terms of personality?" He gets down his horse and says, "If your brothers were as nice as you, we would already be at Wu Dang now." Zhang CuiShan says, "What? You say that you've met my brothers? Which ones?" Du Dajin thinks, "You really know how to put up an act." And says, "I saw all your other brothers today." Zhang CuiShan stutters for a moment, then asks, "You've also seen my third brother Yu?" Du Dajin says, "You mean Yu DaiYan? I don't know who's Yu DaiYan. I just saw the six of them together. So he must be there." Zhang CuiShan says, "Six people? Which six people?" Du Dajin says, "Your brothers won't give their names, so how would I know? Since you are the fifth hero, then they must be the rest of the seven heroes." Zhang CuiShan seems lost in thought, and asks, "Did you really see them?" Du Dajin says, "Of course. Everyone in my agency saw them." Zhang CuiShan says, "That doesn't make sense. Brother Song and the others are all preparing for master's birthday. Only I came down the mountain to find my third brother. So how could you have met them?"

Du Dajin says, "You mean, that person with a birthmark on his face isn't Hero Song?" Zhang CuiShan says, "None of my brothers have any birthmarks on his face."

Cold sweat rushes over Du Dajin. He says, "They said that they're the six heroes of Wu Dang. Two of them are even Taoists. So we..." Zhang CuiShan says, "Although our master is a Taoist, none of his students are. Did they really say that they're the Six Heroes of Wu Dang?" Du Dajin thinks back, and realizes that those people never did openly say who they are. After a pause, he says, "Looks like these people are up to

no good. We have to chase them down!" As he says this he quickly gets back on his horse, and start riding back towards Wu Dang Mountain. Zhang CuiShan rides alongside, and says, "It doesn't matter too much if they're simply masquerading as us. Why not just let them go?" Du DaJin says, "But what about that person? Someone asked me to escort this person to your Venerable Zhang SanFeng. These six people took him..." Zhang CuiShan says, "Who is this person you're talking about?"

Du DaJin told Zhang CuiShan what had happened as they galloped back. Zhang CuiShan then asks, "What's the wounded person's name? What about his look?" Du DaJin says, "I don't know his name, but he's around thirty." He then proceeds describe that person's face. Zhang CuiShan says shockingly, "This... this is my Third Brother Yu."

He then asks, "How did my third brother get injured? Who asked you to escort him here? Who's the enemy?" Du DaJin cannot answer these, and does not respond. Zhang CuiShan asks again, "What do those people who took away my third brother look like?" Sub-leader Shi then describes their looks. Zhang CuiShan says, "Thank you. I shall go on ahead."

After searching for hours, Zhang CuiShan sees a broken carriage on the side of the road. Turning around, he sees a person lying on the ground. With his heart beating fast, Zhang CuiShan races up next to the person, only to see that it's indeed Yu DaiYan. Happy and distressed at the same time, Zhang CuiShan quickly picks him up and touches his face. Feeling warmth, he let out a sigh of relief, and then yells, "Third brother, you... what happened... I'm your fifth brother... fifth brother!" He examines Yu DaiYan, only to see all his joints crushed, and blood pouring out. Obviously, whoever hurt him did so a short while ago.

While his first thoughts were rage and revenge, Zhang CuiShan then promptly remembers that Yu DaiYan's life is still in danger. He did not bring any medicine down the mountain, so he quickly put Yu DaiYan on his back and quickly runs up the mountain, using all his lightness kung fu ability.

Since today is their master's ninetieth birthday, the Wu Dang's main Purple Paradise Hall has been filled with an aura of happiness. The six disciples all gave their toast to Zhang SanFeng. The only problem was that they're missing Yu DaiYan. So at noon, Zhang CuiShan said to his master, "Let me go down the mountain to check up on him." Who would've thought that Zhang CuiShan would also disappear? It should've taken him at most a couple of hours to reach the old river before turning back. But it's now nightfall, yet still no sight of him.

The dinner in the hall has long been prepared, the candles almost half burnt. Everyone feels uncomfortable. Sixth disciple Yin LiTing and seventh disciple Muo ShengGu pace in and out of the hall. Zhang SanFeng is quite aware of these two missing disciples' temper. Yu DaiYan is calm and composed, and can always be counted on to accomplish a task. Zhang CuiShan is smart and quick-witted, and is decisive. So if they haven't come back yet, something important must have happened.

First disciple Song YuanQiao looks at the candles, and then says with a smile, "Master, third and fifth brother must have found some terrible things happening down the mountain. They know that the best gift to you is to do good deeds. That's why they're late." Zhang SanFeng says with a smile, "I remember you saved a widow from suicide back when I was eighty. But you know, if you kids have to wait ten years in between your good deeds, people might get a bit impatient." His five disciples laughed. Zhang SanFeng has always had a

casual relationship with his students, so they joke all the time.

Zhang SongXi then says, "But you're going to at least live till two hundred years old. So even if we just do one good deed per ten years, it's still going to be a lot." Muo ShengGu adds with a laugh, "I'm just afraid that we won't be able to keep up for that long..."

Before he could finish, Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou looked out the hall and yelled together, "Is that the third brother?" Zhang CuiShan says, "It's me!" Only to see him carrying a person on the back, running into the hall with sweat all over his face, yelling, "Master, third brother... someone attacked him..." As everyone looks in shock, Zhang CuiShan stumbled a bit, and falls unconscious.

Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou realize that Zhang CuiShan only fell down due to exhaustion, while Yu DaiYan's situation is much more dire. Together they pick him up, and check his vital signs. Zhang SanFeng's heart shook upon seeing his disciple injured, and then takes out 3 'Tiger Life Extending Pill' and put it in Yu DaiYan's mouth. But Yu Dai, in his unconscious state, could not swallow them. Zhang SanFeng then applies his inner power Yu DaiYan's Jia Che Point. After a while, Yu DaiYan's throat finally responds, and swallows the pills.

At this point, Zhang SongXi begins to massage the muscles on his neck, while Zhang SanFeng continues apply his chi to several different important pressure points on Yu DaiYan's body, trying to revive him.

After a while, Zhang CuiShan came about again, and asks, "Master, can you save third brother?" Zhang SanFeng only says, "Everyone eventually dies in this world..." Only to see a

servant come in, saying, "There are some people outside who wants to see you, master. They say they're from the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." Zhang CuiShan quickly stands up, his face filled with hatred, says, "It's them!" and quickly goes outside. Only to hear some sounds of weapons clashing outside, as Yin LiTing and Muo ShengGu quickly follows to help their fifth brother. They see Zhang CuiShan holding a burly man by the collar and then throws him down, yelling, "It's all this old guy's fault!"

Muo ShengGu, hearing that it's this old man who injured his third brother, begins to step up and give him a kick, but Song YuanQiao quickly stops him. Only to hear someone outside yelling, "Do you Wu Dang sect have any manners? I sincerely want to come and visit, yet you would treat us like this?" Song YuanQiao quickly goes up to Du DaJin and unseals his pressure points. Then he says, "Don't worry. Be a little patient, and we will sort out the truth." This sentence came out in a serious manner backed up by a great deal of inner power. Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi thought he's actually Zhang SanFeng, and became silent.

Song YuanQiao says, "Fifth brother. Tells what had happened. Don't be in a hurry, but be detailed." Zhang CuiShan stares at the Dragon Gate people a bit, and then proceeds to tell the story. Du DaJin then added what happened before he met Zhang CuiShan. Song YuanQiao can see that his kung fu is nowhere near the level of Yu DaiYan. That, plus his willingness to come to Wu Dang, pretty much dissolves him of any possible guilt. Du DaJin finally adds at the end, "Hero Song, I'm sorry that we weren't able to protect Hero Yu. But what do we do now with all the family members of my agency's employees?"

Despite concentrating on healing Yu DaiYan, Zhang SanFeng heard all of Du DaJin's words clearly, and says, "LianZhou,

you take ShengGu to Lin An and protect the Dragon Gate Escort Agency.” Yu LianZhou nods, thinking, “Master really is kind. Although it’s possible that this customer Yin maybe bluffing, it’s still not a good idea to leave so many employee’s relatives alone and vulnerable.”

Zhang CuiShan says, “Look at what this Du guy did to our third brother. Why would you help him out?” Song YuanQiao says, “How can you say that, fifth brother? Do you know why Head Leader Du came in the first place?” Zhang CuiShan says, “Obviously for the gold. Do you really think it’s because he cares for third brother?” When Du Dajin hears this, his face immediately turns red.

Song YuanQiao says, “Don’t be rude to our guests. You’re tired too. How about taking a rest!” Being the first brother, Song YuanQiao wields great amount of power within Wu Dang. All other brothers defers to him. So when Song YuanQiao told Zhang CuiShan to rest, Zhang CuiShan could only close his mouth. But still fearing for Yu DaiYan’s life, he did not go back to his room.

Song YuanQiao then says, “Second brother, hurry up and gather your stuff with seventh brother. You’ll leave tonight since this is urgent.” Yu LianZhou and Muo ShengGu quickly complied. Du Dajin, feeling warmth in his heart due to Wu Dang’s kindness, says to Zhang SanFeng, “Venerable Zhang. Thank you for your help. We won’t bother you any longer. Goodbye.”

Song YuanQiao says, “Wait. Since you are already here, how about staying for the night. We also have some things we need to clear up.” Although his voice is calm, it carries a very serious and ordering tone, prompting Du Dajin to agree.

Yu LianZhou and Muo ShengGu then said goodbye to

everyone, taking extra long with Yu DaiYan, knowing this might be the last time they would ever see him.

The hall suddenly became silent, with only Zhang SanFeng's methodic breathing providing any noise. After about an hour, Yu DaiYan suddenly yells loudly, shaking everyone in the room. Du Dajin sneaked a peek at Yu DaiYan, wondering whether this is a good or a bad scream.

Zhang SanFeng says, "SongXi, LiTing, take your third brother back to his room." Zhang SongXi and Yin LiTing promptly follow his order. When they came back out again, Yin LiTing asks, "Is he going to recover?" Zhang SanFeng takes a deep breath, and then says, "It will take a month before I can tell if he lives or dies. Even if he survives, he'll never... never be able to move again. His life is..." And proceeds to shake his head. Yin LiTing suddenly starts to cry, while Zhang CuiShan quickly gets to slap Du Dajin. This move came quick as lightning, and Du Dajin could not block in time before the palm slapped his cheek. As Zhang CuiShan tries to slap him again, Zhang SongXi quickly comes over and pushes the palm out of the way.

When Du Dajin backs off, something heavy drops out of his robe, falling onto the floor. It's a gold nugget. Zhang CuiShan says, "Humph, you greedy bastard. Giving away my third brother just for some gold..." Before he finished, he suddenly sees the fingerprints on the nugget, and asks, "Big brother, this... this is Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger." Song YuanQiao looks at it, and then gives it to Zhang SanFeng. Zhang SanFeng looks at it for a while, and then looks at Song YuanQiao for a moment silently.

Zhang CuiShan yells, "Master, this is Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger. No other kung fu in the world can possibly do this, right?" At this moment, Zhang SanFeng suddenly remembers

his childhood days with Jue Yuan, matching palms with He ZuDao, and chased out of Shaolin onto Wu Dang Mountain. He realizes that Zhang CuiShan is correct, that this is indeed Golden Steel Finger. No other Finger techniques can match this in terms of power. Although his own inner power is very high, he has never learnt such Hard techniques. As for other sects' Hard techniques, none can accomplish this. But should he confirm Zhang CuiShan's guess, his disciples would want revenge. That would be very undesirable.

Zhang CuiShan can see that he's correct from his master's look, and asks, "Is it possible that some extremely intelligent person invented a finger technique that can do this?" Zhang SanFeng says, "That's impossible. It took Shaolin hundreds of years to perfect this. I don't think anyone can invent it by himself." Song YuanQiao says, "In that case, we can confirm that third brother's joints were destroyed by Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger."

When Du Dajin hears that they think it's Shaolin who injured Yu DaiYan, he quickly gets up, wanting to say something, but did not say it. After a while, he says, "No... It can't be Shaolin. I've been studying there for over ten years, yet have never seen those six people." Song YuanQiao looks at him, and says, "Sixth brother, why don't you show our guest to his room. Get him some dinner. I'm sure he's hungry." Yin LiTing goes over to Du Dajin to send him out. Although Du Dajin wants to speak some more, he finally decides against it, and followed Yin LiTing.

After settling down Du Dajin, Yin LiTing goes back to Yu DaiYan's room, and cried again as he saw Yu DaiYan's pale, stiff face. When he came back out into the hall, he heard Zhang SanFeng say, "How venomous. SongXi. What do you suggest we do?"

Out of all his students, Zhang SongXi is the cleverest. He normally doesn't speak his mind much, but he is very good at analyzing. After Zhang CuiShan came back carrying Yu DaiYan, he felt much sadness, but at the same time started to investigate into this matter. Now that he heard his master ask, he says, "I believe this has nothing to do with Shaolin, but rather the Dragon Saber." Zhang CuiShan and Yin LiTing both let out an 'Ah', while Song YuanQiao says, "Fourth brother. I'm sure you've thought this out. Tell us your conclusion." Zhang SongXi says, "With third brother's mild temper, it's extremely unlikely that he made any enemy for no reason. That bandit he was suppose to kill was an outlaw. There's no reason why Shaolin would hurt him over that." Zhang SanFeng nods. Zhang SongXi continues, "Other than his joints, third brother was also poisoned back at Lin An city. If we want to find out exactly what had happened, we must first go to Lin An to investigate."

Zhang SanFeng nods again, says, "The poison he suffered is very unique. I still haven't found the right antidote. There are several tiny holes in his right palm and leg. Does anyone know who uses this type of hidden weapon?" Song YuanQiao says, "This is strange. If this person is good enough so that he can hit third brother with hidden weapons, why would they need poison on it?"

They all begin to think over this matter. After a while, they still could not find an answer, until Zhang SongXi says, "That man with the birthmark could've easily killed third brother, but instead simply paralyzed him. This obviously meant that he wanted to get some information from third brother. In my opinion, this information must have something to do with the Dragon Saber. Remember what Du Dajin said, that one of those six people yelled, 'Where's the Dragon Saber?'" Yin LiTing says, " 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to

not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' This phrase has been around for a hundred years, could it be that there really is a Dragon Saber?"

Zhang SanFeng says, "Not even for a hundred years, at most seventy to eighty. It did not exist when I was young."

Zhang CuiShan says, "Fourth brother's right. We need to go down to the south to find the killer."

Zhang SanFeng asks Song YuanQiao, "What's your opinion?" For the past few years, Zhang SanFeng has been letting Song YuanQiao manage most issues within the Wu Dang sect. So he wants Song YuanQiao to make the decision. Song YuanQiao says, "Master. Not only is this about third brother's revenge, but also the reputation of Wu Dang. If we don't settle this in the right fashion, we might cause some big problems."

Zhang SanFeng says, "Right! You and SongXi, LiTing will take my letter to Shaolin tomorrow and meet Abbot Kong Wen. Ask him how to handle the matter. Shaolin's very strict. He will know how to take care of this properly." Song YuanQiao, Zhang SongXi, and Yin LiTing nod together. Zhang SongXi thinks, "Sixth brother alone should be sufficient for this trip. There must be some other reason that master wants all three of us to go." Zhang SanFeng confirms this by adding, "I am a escapist from Shaolin. After all these years, I guess they must respect the fact that I'm quite old, and never bothered to come to Wu Dang to capture me. But there is still some friction between us. Which is why I want three of you to go, to show more respect."

Zhang SanFeng then turns to Zhang CuiShan and says, "CuiShan, you'll go down south tomorrow, and meet up with your second and sixth brother. There, listen to second

brother's orders." Zhang CuiShan nods. Zhang SanFeng then says, "Don't worry about drinking any wine tonight. A month later, we'll gather here again. If DaiYan won't recover, we can at least say goodbye to him." When he said to this part, he sighed deeply with a gloomy expression. Yin LiTing continues to wipe his tears as he cries. Zhang SanFeng then says, "Let's go to sleep."

Song YuanQiao says, "Master, third brother has been righteous his whole life. The lord will surely bless him, and... and..." He couldn't go on, knowing that more words would only sadden his master further. With tears coming out of his eyes, he follows his fellow brothers out, and back to his room.

End of Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 - Among the Misfortune and Disorder, the Characters Showed the Way

(Translated by Meh)



Only to see him write those words over and over, in many different ways, his strokes became longer and longer, his arm movement slower and slower, until they began to move with great ease, as if he were practicing martial arts. Zhang CuiShan, fixated on his master's movements, was amazed and joyous. His master had combined the twenty-four characters into a single, powerful martial arts style.

Filled with pain and frustration, with nowhere to vent, Zhang CuiShan tossed and turned on the bed for over two hours. He then quietly got up, and decided to beat up Du Dajin to vent his frustration. Afraid that his big brother and fourth brother may stop him, Zhang CuiShan stayed extra quiet as he walked through the hallway. As he entered the main hall, he saw a man with both hands behind his back, pacing back and forth continuously.

In the darkness, his eyes gazed upon a tall shadow figure, making heavy footsteps, and realized that it is the master. He stopped immediately, knowing his master would detect any further movement. Should the master then ask him why he is up, Zhang CuiShan would have to tell the truth.

Only to see Zhang SanFeng pace back and forth for a while, inspecting his surroundings, when suddenly he raised his right hand, and began to write characters in the air. Zhang SanFeng is as much a scholar as he is a martial arts master, and his students often sees him reciting poems and writing characters. So it's not unusual for him to do such a thing. Zhang CuiShan looked at the strokes he made in the air, realized the characters were 'Grief Disorder'. After repeatedly writing those two characters a few times, he followed up with the characters 'Tea Poison'. Then it suddenly dawned up on him, "Master's writing out the characters in the 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style'." Zhang CuiShan's received the

nickname of 'Silver Hook and Iron Brush', because he used a silver Tiger Hook with his left hand, and a Judge's Iron Brush with his right. After getting this nickname, he realized that scholars might snicker at him being fake scholar, so he began to study literature just as hard as his kung fu. Zhang SanFeng was indeed writing in 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style' created by Wang XiZhi*. By now his master's finger-brush did not lower back down or retract, did not return nor repeat, following exactly the intentions of the 'Grief-Disorder Notice'.

*Wang XiZhi is perhaps the most famous calligrapher in Chinese history. He's most famous for his cursive style of writing.

Zhang CuiShan had seen this style of writing two years ago. He remembered that its usage of the brush emphasized easy top-to-bottom strokes, words clear and strong but hard to pull up. Zhang CuiShan always preferred 'Orchid Pavilion Poem Sequential Writing Style', 'Seventeen Writing Style' and others that are more majestic and solemn in nature. At this moment, as he saw his master's finger writes in the midair, "Tired of obeisance: Incredible grief and disorder, the ancestor's graves one again tormented, difficult to bring back." Each stroke filled with an air of gloom and grief. He saw just how Wang XiZhi must've felt when he created this 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style'.

Wang XiZhi lived in the Eastern Jin* period. He was born to a prosperous family, but was not of Han origin. His family went southward to escape the chaos. During this chaotic time, his ancestor's graves were robbed, which really saddened his heart, and quite evident in his 'Misfortune-Disorder Writing Style'. Being a carefree youngster, how could Zhang CuiShan possibly understand the nature of this writing style? But his martial brother's terrible injury finally allowed him to comprehend the depth of 'Misfortune-Disorder Writing Style'.

*Eastern Jin is one of the countries that existed between the Three-Kingdoms era and China's reunification under the Sui Dynasty.

Zhang SanFeng repeated those words several times, sighed deeply, walked to the center of the room, paused for a moment, and then started to write again. This time, his strokes again looked different. Zhang CuiShan followed Zhang SanFeng's fingers, saw that the first character written was 'Martial', the second one 'World'. In succession, Zhang SanFeng wrote out twenty-four characters total, exactly the phrase they discussed earlier, 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' Zhang CuiShan thought his master wrote them to better comprehend the meanings behind these words, and deduce the cause of Yu DaiYan's injury. But how did this event have to do with the Dragon Saber and Heaven Sword, the two supreme mythical weapons?

Only to see him write those words over and over, in many different ways, his strokes became longer and longer, his arm movement slower and slower, until they began to move with great ease, as if he were practicing martial arts. Zhang CuiShan, fixated on his master's movements, was amazed and joyous. His master had combined the twenty-four characters into a single, powerful martial arts style. Each character contained multiple moves, with even more variations. The characters 'Dragon' and 'Compete' contained numerous strokes, while the words 'Saber' and 'Under' have only a few, but the longer characters were not written in a hurry, nor the shorter characters crudely, the contracted strokes were just as striking, like a cankerworm unyielding, the vertical strokes were just as dangerous, like a cunning

rabbit escaping, the dots were written with ease, yet powerful and sturdy, the long slants seemed like the blowing wind, the dancing snow, the thick and heavy parts seem like a tiger's squat, an elephants footsteps*, only to see some strokes floating in midair, like the dancing of the snow, while others heavy as tiger's roar, moving as an elephant. Zhang CuiShan's eyes followed the movements thoroughly, and instinctively began to memorize them. These twenty-four characters contain two 'Not' and two 'Heaven'. Yet each one is written in a unique manner.

*Note: These are descriptions of various basic strokes that typically make up Chinese characters. If you have some understanding of them, you might be able to picture what Jin Yong wanted the readers to see.

In the recent years, Zhang SanFeng rarely taught kung fu anymore. Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou taught his final two disciples, Muo ShengGu and Yin LiTing. So despite being the fifth disciple, Zhang CuiShan really is the last person Zhang SanFeng had ever taught kung fu firsthand. Before, Zhang CuiShan's knowledge was limited, and rarely grasped the deep concepts behind much of the martial arts skills Zhang SanFeng demonstrated. But he had since come a long way with the experience of recent years, plus the fact that they shared the same feelings tonight, two hearts as one, meeting misfortune and felt anguish, encountering torment and whisked it away. Under these extraordinary circumstances, Zhang SanFeng changed these twenty-four characters into a type of martial arts. He obviously did not plan on it, just as it was pure coincidence that Zhang CuiShan would see him at this moment. The two of them, one watched while one practiced, immersed themselves into these words, forgetting the outside world.

Zhang SanFeng repeatedly wrote those words for over four

hours, until the moon had risen to the top of the sky. Swoosh, the right palm came straight down, just like the sparkle of a star or a sword, thus completing the final stroke of the last character 'compete'.

Zhang SanFeng then looked up into the sky, and said, "CuiShan, what do you think of my writing skills?"

Zhang CuiShan gasped in shock, as he did not expect his master to notice him without ever turning around. He promptly walked out of his hiding place, and said, "For your disciple to personally see master put on such an amazing display, words cannot even begin to describe my feelings. I'll go get the others so they can also learn it."

Zhang SanFeng shook his head, said, "I got caught up in the moment, which is why it looked so good. If you want me to repeat it again, I doubt I can write nearly as well. Besides, the other students don't know much about calligraphy. Even if they do see it, they would have a hard time comprehending." As he spoke, he walked out of the main hall.

Zhang CuiShan did not dare sleep, for fear of forgetting these intricate techniques, and immediately sat down in a meditating position. Each stroke each drag, each move each variation, silently recorded into his memory. Sometimes, he'd write out a few characters from the excitement. Even Zhang CuiShan himself could not remember how long it took him, but he finally recorded those twenty-four characters, and two-hundred-fifteen variations-there are 215 strokes within those 24 characters- into his memory.

He stood up, practiced once, and felt his body light and calm as the cloud, incredibly refreshed. When finished, he looked up, blinked a bit, only to see the sun high up in the western sky. Zhang CuiShan gathered himself, not believing that it's

past noon already, but finally realized that he had been practicing for more than half a day.

Zhang CuiShan wiped off the sweat on his face, and walked over to Yu DaiYan's room, only to see Zhang SanFeng healing Yu DaiYan with his inner power. Upon asking, Zhang CuiShan found out that Song YuanQiao, Zhang SongXi, and Yin LiTing had left in the morning. None of them said goodbye, as they didn't want to interfere with his meditation. The Dragon Gate Escort Agency's people also left. Although Zhang CuiShan's clothes were now soaked in sweat, Zhang CuiShan was in too much of a hurry to change them. He quickly grabbed his weapons and his normal change of clothing, took out some travel money, and returned to Yu DaiYan's room, said, "Master. Your disciple will be leaving." Zhang SanFeng nodded, smiled slightly.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the bedside, only to see Yu DaiYan's face gray-black, his whole body almost like a dead person. With pain in Zhang CuiShan's heart, he said, "Third brother, even if it cost me my life, I shall give you your revenge." He then kowtowed to his master three times, and left.

He rode his long-legged spotted horse down the Wu Dang Mountain. By the time he left Wu Dang, it was already pretty late in the afternoon. Night came after riding south for only about twenty miles. Just as he entered the roadside inn, dark clouds gathered in the sky, followed by pouring rain. This rain lasted throughout the evening. The next morning, he woke up to an extremely muggy room, with loud sounds of rain hitting the rooftop outside. Zhang CuiShan bought a hat from the innkeeper, and continued to ride despite the weather. Fortunately, his horse is a prized stallion, which kept its footing despite galloping on the incredibly slippery mud.

Upon reaching the edge of the Yellow River, he saw thick yellow river waves rolling heavily in the river, the current almost impossible for anyone to cross. He found out from the local residents that the water downstream had flood the riverbanks, and devastated the people there. As Zhang CuiShan entered the nearby town, only to see the flood victims seeking refuge in the town, everyone soaked in water.

As he traveled across town, Zhang CuiShan saw a row of riders in front, who just happened to be the people of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. He hurried up, went past them, and blocked their way.

Distressed upon seeing Zhang CuiShan, Du Dajin stuttered, "W... What do you need, Fifth Hero Zhang?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Have you seen the homeless people from the flooding?" Du Dajin didn't expect this question, paused, and then responded, "Why do you ask?" Zhang CuiShan smirked, said, "It's always right to do good deeds. How about donating some gold to the needy?" Du Dajin's face turned white, said, "People like us put our lives on the line when we work. How would we find the money to save the homeless?" Zhang CuiShan lowered his voice, said, "Why don't you take out the two thousand taels of gold, and donate them?" Du Dajin reached for his saber, asked, "Are you purposely looking for trouble today?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes. I'm going to get the money either way today."

Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi took out their weapons, and moved up next to Du Dajin. Meanwhile, Zhang CuiShan remained empty-handed, smirked, and then said, "Leader Du, you took your customer's money, but did you accomplish the task asked? Do you really have the nerve to keep the gold?"

Du Dajin said with a purple face, "But Hero Yu was sent to the Wu Dang Mountain alive, right? He was already injured when we took him in, and he's still not dead even now." Zhang CuiShan said angrily, "Do you really think you can weasel your way out of this? Were my third brother's joints broken before you escorted him?"

Before Du Dajin could respond, sub-leader Shi cut in, "Just say what you want us to do." Zhang CuiShan said, "I'm going to break every single bone in your arms and legs!" As he said this, he immediately flew forward. Sub-leader Shi quickly raised his staff to attack, while Zhang CuiShan's left hand swooshed down and across to the left, writing out his newly learnt kung fu's long-slant in the character 'Heaven'. Sub-leader Shi's staff fell out of his hand, and fell off the horse. Sub-leader Zhu wanted to retreat, but how could he be quick enough? Zhang CuiShan very naturally finished the character "Heaven" with the short-slant right, finger swept across sub-leader Zhu's waist, grabbed it, and threw him and his saddle a few meters away, in one smooth motion. For Sub-leader Zhu's foot were stuck so firmly into the stirrup, plus Zhang CuiShan's move was simply too powerful, that the saddle actually broke off the horse. With his feet firmly stuck in the stirrup, Sub-leader Zhu couldn't get up.

Shocked upon seeing such quick and smooth attacks, Du Dajin quickly got his horse to move forward. Zhang CuiShan turned around swiftly, gathered his energy, and shot out his left fist. This attack is the vertical stroke in the character 'Under', which hit Du Dajin flatly on the chest. Du Dajin's kung fu is much better than Zhu and Shi, and did not fall off the horse. With extreme anger, he reined in his horse, tried to get off his horse to fight, when suddenly he felt a surge of pain from his throat, and coughed up a gulp of blood. He staggered, took a deep breath, only to feel yet another cluster of hot blood, surging within. Although he tried to act

tough, his body could not hold up, both knees weakened, and fell down to the ground.

Three young sub-leaders and all the rest of the people could only watch in alarm, who dared step forward to help?

Zhang CuiShan originally planned to break their arms and legs, to help vent his frustration, but upon seeing the three agency leaders injured so deeply, especially Du Dajin, he now felt a little guilty. He never realized just how powerful this new 'Heaven and Dragon Kung Fu' really is. Zhang CuiShan said, "Listen up. Today I'll stop here. But you must promise to give all your money to the homeless, so they can rebuild their homes. Don't try to cheat. If I find out that you've kept any money for yourselves, I'll tear down your Dragon Gate Escort Agency, and kill every living, breathing person in it." That last sentence came from Du Dajin's story of what that customer Yin had said, so he conveniently used it.

Du Dajin tried to get up, only to feel his back in extreme pain, and began to cough up blood again. Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi only had some scratches, but neither dared fight Zhang CuiShan again. Sub-leader Shi said, "Fifth Hero Zhang, since we could not accomplish our task, we should return the money to our customer. Besides, the money is back at the agency. How can we use it to help these homeless?"

Zhang CuiShan said with a cold smile, "Do you think I'm a child? All your kung fu experts came on this delivery. There are only family members back at the agency. Would you really keep so much money with them?" He scanned around, and walked over to one of the carts. Zhang CuiShan raised his palm to hit the case, 'Bang, Bang, Bang', the case on the cart fell apart, as gold nuggets fell out.

The leaders' faces turned pale, as they wondered, "How did he know it was on that cart?" They didn't realize that although Zhang CuiShan is young, he's smart and experienced. He saw that this cart made the heaviest prints. And the three people guarding it did not try move at all when their leaders were attacked. Therefore, this case must contain some valuable items. After a cold laugh, Zhang CuiShan got up on his horse, and galloped away.

He felt very delighted, knowing the due to Du Dajin's fear for his relatives' safety, he would certainly give the money to the needy. As he continued riding, Zhang CuiShan repeated the variations of those twenty-four characters in his head. That night when he first saw this kung fu, he simply felt that it was mysterious and strange. Only when used in combat, did Zhang CuiShan realize its power. To him, learning a new, powerful kung fu felt ten times better than obtaining some priceless treasure. Finally, when he remembered Yu DaiYan's condition, Zhang CuiShan could not help but sigh in sadness.

He traveled for several days in the heavy rain. Even with his spotted horse's endurance, fatigue set in after a while. By the time he arrived in the Shan Xi province, his horse became a bit sick. Caring about the health of his horse, Zhang CuiShan traveled very slowly for quite some time. So it was already the thirtieth day of the fourth month when he arrived at the city of Lin An.

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He booked a room at the local inn, and wondered, "I've traveled way too slowly. I wonder if Du Dajin and his people had returned to the agency. Where could my second and seventh brother be? Also, considering my altercation with Du Dajin and the others, I don't think I can go to their agency

openly. I should instead go in secret tonight.”

After dinner, upon asking an inn worker, he found out that the location of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency lies by the bank of the West Lake. At the marketplace, he bought a new robe and the incredibly renowned fan of Hang Zhou. Afterwards he took a bath, brushed his hair, and changed his clothing, Zhang CuiShan looked into the mirror, only to see himself looking nothing like a kung fu expert, but rather a scholar. Zhang CuiShan held up a brush, thought he should write a poem on it, and spontaneously wrote out the Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber poem, each stroke naturally and elegantly. Looking at the fan again, he thought, “Wow! Even my writing skills have improved from learning this new kung fu. These words look excellent.” He folded the fan, walked outside, towards the West Lake.

Even before the end of the Southern Sung Dynasty, Lin An had fell under the control of the Mongolians. Due to its location as the capital of the Southern Sung Dynasty, the Mongolians were especially weary of its citizens, afraid that they may be too deeply in love with the old regime. Therefore, they established harsh, strict policies unto the citizens. That’s why most people have moved to other places. A hundred years ago, Lin An had been an incredibly prosperous place, but that was the old days.

As Zhang CuiShan walked down the road, he only saw broken-down houses, dusts in his eyes, as the former famous city of the Lower-Yangtze River region had turned into a almost a ghost town. Even though the sun had not yet set, all the residents had already closed their doors and windows, only to see Mongolian patrol soldiers marching on the street. Zhang CuiShan didn’t want unnecessary trouble, so he immediately hid in the alley upon hearing the sounds of the troops.

In the past, lanterns would light up the river at night, but now, only darkness covered the city, with no pedestrians in sight. Zhang CuiShan followed the inn worker's directions to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency.

The agency's is made up of five buildings, one linked behind another, its gate facing the West Lake, with a pair of stone lions decorating the entrance. Zhang CuiShan saw the large houses from afar, walked toward it slowly, only to see a boat docked at the lake outside. Two lanterns lit up the front of the boat, with a single person tasting wine under the candlelight. Zhang CuiShan thought, "This person is in an artistic mood." Only to see the lanterns outside the agency unlit, the large front doors shut tightly, probably meant that everyone inside is already asleep.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the main gate and thought, "Du DaJin said that someone carried third brother here a month ago. I wonder who was that?" While pondering, he suddenly heard deep sigh from behind him.

This sigh sounded like a ghost in the dark, silent night. Zhang CuiShan quickly turned, scanned the area, but other than the single person on the boat, there is no one else around. Zhang CuiShan felt uneasy, examined the person on the boat, only to see him wearing a green robe, scholarly dressed, just like himself. With the dim lighting, Zhang CuiShan could not see his face clearly, but his cheeks looked very pale white, as the lanterns shined on it, looked like the green waves on the lake itself. Lone boat in the freezing water, cold and dark, seemingly out of this world. That person sat quietly on the boat, and for a long, long time, other than the sleeves flying with the wind, there was no movement.

Zhang CuiShan originally wanted to sneak into the building, but changed his mind upon seeing the man on the boat, thinking that it's really not the righteous thing to do. So he went up to the door and knocked three times. In the silence of the night, the sound from these three knocks could be heard from far away. Yet for a long time, no one came to the door. Zhang CuiShan knocked on the door three more times, a bit louder this time, almost hurting his ears. Again he could hear no movement from inside. Not sure what's going on, he reach out with his hand and pushed the door, only to see it open without a sound, for it was not locked. Zhang CuiShan entered the courtyard and yelled, "Is your Escort Leader Du here?" As he spoke, he walked into the main hall.

The main hall is completely dark, without any candlelight. Suddenly, the main gate closed quickly behind him.

Zhang CuiShan hesitated a moment, turned around towards the gate, only to see it shut tightly, the lock now in place, meaning there's someone here with him. Zhang CuiShan smiled coldly, thought, "What's this all about?" Given the circumstances, he might as well enter the main hall.

So he stepped into the room, only to hear sounds of wind coming from all directions, as four people surrounded him. Zhang Cuishan jumped out of the harm's way. In the darkness, white light glittered, only to see weapons in each person's hand. He quickly moved to the left, towards the west side, as his right fist swept across, hitting the Sun Point of one of the attackers, stunning him instantly, followed by his left hand sweeping from top-right down to bottom-left, hitting another person's waist. These are the first two strokes of 'no'. Zhang CuiShan's left hand then swooshed down, as his right fist shot out and wrote the 'point', completing the whole 'no' character through these four strokes, knocking down all four attackers.

He doesn't exactly know who his attackers are, so Zhang CuiShan did not use much power, only about thirty percent or so. When the fourth person fell down, breaking a chair along the way, he yelled, "I can't believe you're so venomous. If you're a true man, then you should leave your name." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "If I'm truly venomous, do you think you'd be alive right now? My name is Zhang CuiShan." That person gasped, as if quite surprised. He said, "You really are Wu Dang's Fifth Hero... 'Silver Hook Iron Brush' Zhang CuiShan? You're not just pretending?"

Zhang CuiShan smiled, reached into his robe and took out his weapons. His left hand held the Silver Tiger Hook, and his right hand held the Judge's Iron Brush, as the two weapons scratched across one another, a few sparks appeared.

During this brief moment of light, Zhang CuiShan saw the four people wearing yellow monk robes lying in front of him, for these are monks. Of course, those monks also saw his appearance at this time. Two of the monks stared intently at him, their eyes filled with hatred. Bewildered, Zhang CuiShan asked, "May I have your names?"

Only to hear a monk yell, "Looks like we can't get our revenge today. Let's go!" As he spoke, the four monks got up, about to leave. But one of them suddenly fell down after walking a few steps, probably because Zhang CuiShan hurt him too deeply. Two monks returned to carry him.

Zhang CuiShan yelled out, "Could you wait up a moment? Revenge for what..." Before he could finish, the monks had jumped over the wall.

Zhang CuiShan felt that something's not right, but could not pinpoint the exact reason. Why would there be four monks

hiding in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency? Why did they ambush him? And what's with this whole 'revenge' deal? He thought, "Surely the residents here would know." He raised his voice and asked, "Is Escort Leader Du at home? Is Escort Leader Du at home?" In the empty hall, echoes reverberated from the walls, yet there is no response.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Surely not all of them slept so soundly, that no one heard me. Are they afraid of me, and simply hiding? Or perhaps they all left?" He lit up a match, only to see several candles on a nearby table. He then lit up a candle and walked into the rooms in the back. After only a few steps, Zhang CuiShan saw a woman lying on the floor motionless. He yelled out, "Big sister, what's going on?" That woman remained still. Zhang CuiShan put a hand under her shoulders and pulled her up, then moved the candle over her face, and gasped out loud.

Only to see this woman smiling, but her muscles tense, and had been dead for several hours. Zhang CuiShan thought she was dead when he touched her, but still felt odd that she'd die with a smile on her face. He stood up, only to see someone behind the left pillar. Walking over, he saw an old man dressed in servant clothing, also dead with a smile on his face.

Bewildered, Zhang CuiShan pulled out his silver hook and scanned the room with the candle. He found several tens of people dead both inside and outside all the houses, indeed the place is filled with corpses, with absolutely no one left alive. After traveling around the world for many years, Zhang CuiShan had already seen many tragedies, but never a massacre such as this one. His heart fluttered, only to see his own shadow shook on the wall. For his hands were wavering, shaking the candle with it, and naturally the shadow too.

Suddenly, he remembered something, "If you fail to make this delivery, I'll kill everyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." Obviously, these people died because of Du Dajin's mistake, not able to adequately protect Yu DaiYan on the way to Wu Dang. He then thought, "That person obviously killed these people because of third brother. Which means he should be third brother's friend. But why would the third brother befriend such a vicious person? Besides, he's obviously much better than Du Dajin in terms of kung fu, so why didn't he escort third brother himself?" The more Zhang CuiShan thought, the more mysterious this whole deal became. He walked out the door to the west. With the candlelight, he saw two yellow-robed monks, backs against the wall, examining him.

Zhang CuiShan backed off a couple of steps, tightened the grip on his hook, and asked, "What do you want?" Only to see the two monks motionless, when suddenly, he realized that they're also dead. Zhang CuiShan gasped, yelled out loud. "Oh no. Revenge, revenge..." Didn't those monks say something like, "I can't believe you're so venomous. If you're a true man, give me your name." And also, "Looks like we can't get our revenge today." It appeared that he would be blamed for the deaths of these people. At that time when he's still in the dark about everything, Zhang CuiShan not only gave his name, but also showed his renowned silver hook and iron brush. But who exactly are those yellow-robed monks?

Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized that he finished off those four monks too quickly, and couldn't therefore figure out their kung fu. But from the exchange, he could feel those monks use a power-oriented, hard kung fu style. Du Dajin is a disciple of Shaolin, so these people are most likely Shaolin monks. But where are second and seventh brother? The master asked them to protect the people of the Dragon Gate

Escort Agency. Could the killer be so powerful that not even my second brother could handle him?

Zhang CuiShan realized that the escaped monks would say that he's the killer, and that Shaolin would eventually look for him. But Zhang CuiShan thought, "I can explain everything later, and the truth will come out one of these days. At that time, surely no killer could escape the search of both Wu Dang and Shaolin. It's more important for me to find second and seventh brother right now." He blew out the candle, walked to the side of the wall, and jumped out.

Before he landed, a sudden, loud, swoosh sound came, as a heavy weapon swept across at him, followed by a yell, "Lie down, Zhang CuiShan." While in midair, Zhang CuiShan could not adjust to evade the weapon, which came with great power. In this critical moment, he quickly tipped the weapon with his left hand, borrowed its force, and lifted himself back up on the wall. This move used several strokes of the character 'Martial'. As the saying goes, "The swallows rise from the water, the geese fly swiftly in the sky, facing danger control yourself, in the middle of danger soar away," to create a path of escape in the middle of a dangerous situation. In this life and death moment, he suddenly realized that this new kung fu could be hard as stone, yet also soft as feather, easily dissipating the opponent's powerful attack. His left foot lightly set on the edge of the wall, the Judge's Iron Brush now in his right hand. From that attack, Zhang CuiShan realized this opponent is very formidable.

The attacker was shocked that Zhang CuiShan could evade his attack so easily, couldn't help but let out a 'huh?' Then he yelled, "Humph, you're pretty good, kid."

Zhang CuiShan put his brush and hook in front of his chest, pointed then down in the 'Willing to Learn' position. This is

Wu Dang's signature pose as a sign of respect to elder opponents. Had Zhang CuiShan not learnt the new kung fu from his master, that last attack would have at least broken his shoulder. Yet even while incredibly angry, Zhang CuiShan did not forget his master's teachings, and leave out courtesy in the face of an opponent.

In the darkness he vaguely saw two yellow-robed monks on his left and right, each with a large, thick staff. The one on the left said, "Zhang CuiShan, the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are fairly renowned in the martial world. Yet how could your ways be so vicious?"

As Zhang CuiShan hear the monk call him by his name, instead of 'Fifth Hero Zhang' or 'Mr. Zhang CuiShan', he felt a surge of anger, and responded in a cold manner, "You don't ask for explanation, nor seek the truth. Instead you hide in the darkness and sneak up on me. Is that what a hero is suppose to do? I have heard that Shaolin's kung fu is unparalleled, but didn't realize that their ability to sneak up on the enemy is also so amazing."

That monk let out a loud grunt, jumped up the wall and attacked at the same time with his staff. Even before the monk landed, Zhang CuiShan felt a strong wind coming from the point of the staff towards his chest, and quickly diverted the staff with his hook. The brush shot out, hitting the middle of the staff. That monk suddenly felt a strong shock coming from the staff, which prevented him from gaining balance on the wall, fell off. Zhang CuiShan only felt much numbness in both hands, thought, "This monk's strength is quite good." He asked, "May I ask for your name?"

The monk on the right said, "I am Yuan Yin. This is my martial brother Yuan Ye." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, so you are the Yuan generation at Shaolin. May I ask why you're here?"

Yuan Yin seemed to be gasping for breath when speaking, said, "This is a serious matter between us Wu Dang and Shaolin. Although we are of the younger generation, we still must intervene in this matter. I ask of you. Now that you've kill all the people in the Dragon Gate Protection Agency, in addition to two of my martial nephews. I want to ask, how Fifth Hero Zhang intends to solve this dilemma involving so many deaths." Despite the courteous nature of his tone, his words were very critical.

Zhang CuiShan said coldly, "I'm also trying to find out who killed these people. But since you're so sure that I did it, I ask you. Did you actually see me murder anyone?" Yuan Yin yelled, "Hui Feng. Why don't you have a chat with Hero Zhang?"

Four yellow-robed monks appeared from the forest, the same ones Zhang CuiShan knocked down earlier. That monk named Hui Feng stepped up and said, "Martial uncle. It's indeed him. He killed all the people in the agency, plus brothers Hui Tong and Hui Guang." Yuan Yin said, "You saw it with your own eyes?" Hui Feng said, "Yes. If the four of us hadn't escaped quickly enough, we would've also been dead." Yuan Yin said, "Monks cannot lie. Plus the reputations of Wu Dang and Shaolin are at stake here. Are you absolutely certain of what you saw?" Hui Feng got on his knees and said, "With the Holy Buddha above listening, every word I now say is the exact truth." Yuan Yin said, "Good. Now recall the exact events." When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he quickly jumped down the wall.

Yuan Ye thought that Zhang CuiShan wanted to kill Hui Feng, and quickly attacked him with a sweep of his staff. Zhang CuiShan lowered his head and easily dodged the attack, in a smooth motion, twisted around behind Hui Feng. Yuan Ye

originally planned on following up with another attack, but saw that he can no longer hurt Zhang CuiShan without first hurting Hui Feng. Yuan Ye retracted his staff and said, "What do you want?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "I just want to hear a bit more closely, hear exactly just how I killed all those people."

Seeing Zhang CuiShan behind him, Hui Feng knew that if he made any hasty moves, Zhang CuiShan could immediately kill him. Even his martial uncles won't be able to help him. But due to his anger towards, Hui Feng did not flinch, yelled, "A few days ago, martial uncle Yuan Xin received a letter from martial brother Du Dajin, north of the Yangtze river. He immediately sent Hui Tong and Hui Guang to help out. Then he sent me a note to also come here, with three fellow martial brothers. Upon entering, Brother Hui Guang said that the enemy might be here tonight, and that the four of us should guard outside. He also told us to not fall for any diversions." Yuan Yin said, "Then what? Keep going."

Hui Feng said, "Soon after dark, I heard Hui Tong fighting in the back hall, followed by a loud scream, as if he were gravely injured. By the time I got there, he's already dead... this bastard Zhang..."

He turned around and pointed his finger at Zhang CuiShan, almost touching his nose, yelling, "I saw you push Brother Hui Guang to the wall with your palm, killing him. I know I'm no match for you, so I simply watched through the window. Then eight people tried to escape, and you followed them outside, killed them all with your hands, not even letting go the old and the young. Afterwards, you left." Zhang CuiShan did not move at all. Even while Hui Feng's saliva fell on his face, he neither dodged nor retaliated. Afterwards, he said coldly, "Then what?"

Hui Feng continued, "After that, I discussed with my three brothers on what to do next. Everyone thought your kung fu was too powerful for us, so we should stay low for a moment. Who'd have thought that you'd come back again just then. We knew we couldn't beat you, but at that moment, we didn't think that that much. I asked for your name, didn't you say that you are Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan? At first I didn't believe you, thinking that the heroes of Wu Dang would not do such a thing. But when you showed your weapons, I had to believe you."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I admit that I did indeed give you my name, showed my weapons, and knocked the four of you down. But are absolutely certain that I'm the one who killed everyone in the escort agency?"

At this moment, Yuan Yin flew up, grabbed Hui Feng's body and pushed him into the distance. He said, "He already told you the whole event. So the renowned Fifth Hero Zhang could not try to hide the truth." He pushed Hui Feng aside so Zhang CuiShan could not try to kill this witness.

Hui Feng said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fine, I'll say it again. I personally saw you killed Hui Guang and Hui Tong, personally saw you killing the eight people in the escort agency." Zhang CuiShan said, "Did you see my face clearly? Was I wearing this same outfit?" As he spoke he took out a match, lighting up his face and body. Hui Feng stared at him with great disdain, said, "You were wearing this robe exactly. At that time, you had a fan in your left hand. Now you have it on your waist."

Zhang CuiShan felt his stomach boiling, not knowing why this monk would purposely say such a lie, walked up and stared into his face, yelled, "If you have the guts, say those

words again. Say that it's me who killed them all, not someone else!"

Hui Feng's eyes suddenly let out a strange expression. He pointed at Zhang CuiShan and said, "You... you're... you're not..." and instantly he fell down onto the ground. Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye quickly went up to look check his condition, only to see an expression of shock on Hui Feng's face, with no pulse in his body.

Yuan Yin yelled, "You... You killed him?" Zhang CuiShan also did not expect to see this turn of events. He quickly turned around, only to see a shadow running away among the trees. He yelled, "Stop!" and immediately flew toward the shadow. If he couldn't find the real killer at this moment, he'd be misunderstood as the killer.

Who'd have thought that while in midair, two swooshes of wind would come from behind, as two staffs caught up to him from left and right. At the same time, the two monks yelled, "Don't think you can get away, murderer!" Zhang CuiShan's brush and hook both swept down, writing the word 'Saber'[only two strokes to this character] in a backhanded manner. His hook bent around and trapped Yuan Ye's staff point, while his brush cast aside Yuan Yin's staff. Borrowing their power, he quickly flew over them to land on the roof behind them. Zhang CuiShan then tried to scan the area, but saw no person in sight.

Yuan Ye quickly jumped up to the roof for another attack. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "I need to find the killer. Don't get in my way!" Yuan Yin said in rage, "You... you killed him in front of my face, and yet try to deny it?" Zhang CuiShan flung Yuan Yin's staff to the side, preventing him from coming up.

Yuan Yin said, "Fifth Hero Zhang. We don't want to take your

life. You simply need to drop your weapons, come with us to the Shaolin, and let the abbot pass judgment on you.” Zhang CuiShan said angrily, “I can’t believe you’re actually ‘Yuan’ generation Shaolin experts. The real killer came and went without you even noticing.” Yuan Yin said, “Look, I can’t personally decide your fate for killing my fellow brothers. So please come with us to Shaolin.” Zhang CuiShan said coldly, “Urgh! I can’t believe the Yuan generation at Shaolin is filled with idiots. You can’t even see who the real killer is?” Yuan Yin said, “I’m sorry. You have too much blood on your hands. We can’t let you escape.”

Upon hearing Yuan Yin so adamantly pointing him as the killer, Zhang CuiShan became angrier and angrier. Not only did he have to argue with Yuan Yin, but he also must fight off Yuan Ye at the same time. In the heat of the battle, Zhang CuiShan said with a smirk, “You think you can actually capture me?”

Only to see Yuan Ye push his staff onto the ground, trying to borrow its force to get him up. Zhang CuiShan jumped at the same time. His lightness kung fu is far superior to Yuan Ye’s, attacked downward as he jumped. Yuan Ye tried to block his attack with the staff, but Zhang CuiShan’s hook suddenly changed directions in midair, followed by a tearing sound, as his hook sliced through Yuan Ye’s shoulder. Yuan let out a scream, fell to the ground. He only lived because Zhang CuiShan showed mercy, and not aim for Yuan Ye’s throat.

Yuan Yin quickly held up his brother and asked, “Are you alright?” Yuan Ye said, “I’m fine! You still talking and not attacking? Stop with the indecisiveness!” Yuan Yin sighed, then raised his staff to attack. Yuan Ye did not bother to wrap up his wound, instead immediately went back to fighting Zhang CuiShan. The dancing staffs carried the wind, both converged to attack as one. Zhang CuiShan knew the wrist

power of the two monks, in addition to the heaviness of their weapons. Should they be able to jump onto the wall, he would have great difficulty winning. So Zhang CuiShan played defensive, guarding his higher vantage point. Neither monks could jump up to the wall as a result. The 'Hui' generation monks have much lower kung fu, so despite seeing their martial uncles at a disadvantage, they had no way of helping.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "I really must go find the real killer quickly, no reason to get caught up in this misunderstanding." He retracted his hook and brush into defensive positions, holding off attack. Just as he's about to spring away, Zhang CuiShan heard a yell from behind, the voice thunderous, followed by a powerful force pushing towards him. Only to see a big-bodied monk jump up unto the roof, both his hands now reaching for Zhang CuiShan's weapons. Although Zhang CuiShan could not see his face in the darkness, he realized that this monk is using Shaolin's famous and powerful Tiger Claws. Yuan Ye yelled, "Thank goodness you're here, brother Yuan Xin. Don't let this murderer get away."

Zhang CuiShan had seldom met any formidable enemy in his lifetime, plus his martial arts recently increased a great deal with this new kung fu. When he saw this new monk attacking, he felt a strong hatred, and began to have the urge to duel with them. He put away his hook and brush, yelled, "Humph, do you think the three of you could beat me?" Just as Yuan Xin's left hand is nearly next to him, Zhang CuiShan retracted his right palm, swooped around and ripped apart a piece of Yuan Xin's robe. As Yuan Xin's claws touched his shoulder, Zhang CuiShan's left foot flew out, hitting Yuan Xin squarely on the kneecap.

Yuan Xin's knees are unusually sturdy, so he did not fell

down even after suffering such an injury. With a loud roar, his right claw came at Zhang CuiShan. At the same time, Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye's staffs also attacked from behind. Yuan Yin's voice might be croaked, seemingly ill, but his kung fu is the best of the three. A staff weighing at least thirty to forty pounds seemed light as a sword in his hands, very quick and flexible.

After meeting his match for the first time in life, Zhang CuiShan thought, "Wu Dang and Shaolin had been considered the two most powerful sects in the world recently, yet we never really had a chance to compete against each other. Today's a good opportunity to test against the powerful Shaolin martial arts." With that thought, he shot out his two palms, freely shifting among the two staffs and a pair of claws, cutting down, capturing, pointing and attacking. Even while fighting one on three, Zhang CuiShan gradually gained the upper hand.

Shaolin and Wu Dang sects both have their strengths and weaknesses. Zhang SanFeng is a seldom-seen genius when it comes to martial arts, but Wu Dang nonetheless lacked the thousands of years of experience Shaolin had. The difference is that, Zhang CuiShan is one of the best Wu Dang fighters, while the three monks are only second tier fighters in Shaolin. So as the fight went on, Zhang CuiShan became more and more energetic, his movements became swifter and faster. Suddenly, his right hand wrote out the long hook in the character 'Dragon', grabbing Yuan Ye's staff, and redirected it unto Yuan Yin's staff. With a loud collision sound, so loud everyone's ears vibrated. Both monks had incredible strength. Their strength, adding Zhang CuiShan's, caused such a powerful collision that blood came out of the two monks' mouths. As Yuan Xin came over to help, Zhang CuiShan quickly stepped to the side, held out his foot in front of Yuan Xin, and then gave him a shove on the back. With the

shove and his own natural forward movement, Yuan Xin immediately tripped to the ground.

Zhang CuiShan said coldly, "Want to take me to Shaolin? You'll have to practice a few more years first." Yuan Xin got up and yelled, "Murderer! Don't try to run away!" And with that the three monks began to come after Zhang CuiShan again. Zhang CuiShan thought, "They really are pesky, but I can't exactly kill them." So he took a deep breath and began to use his lightness kung fu to escape.

Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye both tried to chase him, but could not catch up, due to their inferior lightness kung fu. They can only yell, "Capture the murderer! Don't let him go!" while chasing along the banks. Zhang CuiShan laughed inside, thinking how can you people catch up to me? Suddenly he heard Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye both yell out "Ahhh!" while Yuan Yin let out a light groan, but also seemingly injured.

Zhang CuiShan turned his head around, only to see all three monks with their hands over their right eyes, as if hit by hidden weapons. Then Yuan Yin yelled, "Zhang CuiShan. If you got the guts, come back and blind my left eye too!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Were they blinded by someone? Who's helping me?" He then realized something, yelled, "Seventh brother, seventh brother. Where are you?" Among the seven Wu Dang heroes, Muo ShengGu's the best at hidden weapons. That's why Zhang CuiShan figured his seventh brother must be here.

But after several yells, no response came. Zhang CuiShan searched around several trees by the banks, but could not find even half a shadow.

Yuan Ye lost control after getting blinded, and wanted to keep

chase Zhang CuiShan. But Yuan Yin stopped him, knowing that doing so would be pointless. He said, "Brother Yuan Ye, we don't have to be in such a hurry to seek revenge. Even if we give up, do you think our elder reverends would let him go? Let's go seek the advice of the abbot. He'll help us."

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Zhang CuiShan felt a bit more comfortable, after seeing the Shaolin monks leave. But he still wondered, "Just who was the person that helped me?" He didn't want to stay by the lake much longer, and decided to hurry back to the inn. After quickly running for about thirty meters, he saw a bush rustling by the lake.

Since there's no wind right now, so someone must be hiding behind it. Zhang CuiShan walked closer, about to ask who's there, when suddenly a person shot out of the bush, attacked him with a saber, yelling, "Today, either you die or I die!"

Zhang CuiShan kicked his foot out, and quickly knocked the saber out of that person's hand, into the lake. Looking closely, he saw that this person is yet another monk, except his kung fu is quite mediocre. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "What are you doing here?" While speaking, he saw three other people lying behind the bush. Zhang CuiShan ignored the monk, and went over to examine the three people. He found that these three people are the three leaders of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Du, Shi, and Zhu.

Shocked, Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Leader Du, what... what happened..." Before he could finish, Du Dajin sprung up, grabbed Zhang CuiShan's collar with both hands, gritted his teeth, said, "Murderer. I just left three hundred taels of silver for myself, yet... yet you still won't let me go?" Zhang CuiShan said, "What are you talking about?" About to brush Du Dajin's hands away, only to see his lip spewing out blood. Zhang CuiShan asked, "Have you suffered internal injuries?"

Du Dajin yelled to that monk, "Martial brother. Remember. The murderer is Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan. Get away before he kills you too!" As he said this, he quickly shot forward, trying to head-butt Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan hurriedly twist around, got out of the way by pushing off on Du Dajin's arm, only to hear a loud thud, as Du Dajin fell onto the ground, ripping off a piece of Zhang CuiShan's clothing along the way. Despite his courage, Zhang CuiShan nonetheless felt very uneasy about tonight's events. Only to see Du Dajin's heartbeat stopped. Obviously, he was already seriously injured, or that push Zhang CuiShan gave could not have killed him.

That monk yelled in shock, "You... you just killed my martial brother..." He quickly turned around, and began to run away as fast as he can.

Zhang CuiShan shook his head, saw that sub-leaders Zhu and Shi's feet are in the water, already dead for some time. Looking at the three bodies, Zhang CuiShan felt much sadness. Although he hated them for making a grave mistake regarding Yu DaiYan, he hardly wanted to see them dead like this. Suddenly, he thought, "Du Dajin thought that I killed them because he left three hundred taels of gold for himself. I never knew anything about that. Besides, even if I did, I would hardly make a big deal out of it."

He reached into Du Dajin's sack, and indeed found several gold nuggets. At this moment, Zhang CuiShan felt that life really is fleeting. This escort leader spent his whole life traveling around, living under constant threat of death, just for some gold. Yet now, with gold right by his side, Du Dajin would no longer be able to enjoy them. He then thought about his great triumph over those Shaolin monks, but how

long can he enjoy this? After all, a hundred years later, he'd be no different from Du DaJin. Zhang CuiShan then sighed deeply.

Suddenly, the sound of zither came from the lake. Zhang CuiShan looked up, only to see a young scholar on a boat, the same one he saw in front of the escort agency earlier. He looked at the three bodies by his side, and at the boat closing in, thought that should the person see him like this, and alert the soldiers, there would be much unnecessary problems. Just as he's about to leave, that gentleman suddenly said, "If this friend likes to observe the night scenery of the lake, why not do so on my boat?" As he said this, Zhang CuiShan saw the boat rowing to the shore.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "If this person had been here all this time, he might have seen something that I missed. Perhaps I get some information from him." So he walked over to the shore, waited for the boat to come, and then stepped onto the head of the boat.

The scholar on the boat stood up, smiled, and gestured with his arm for Zhang CuiShan to sit down. Under the lantern light, Zhang CuiShan saw that this scholar's hands are whiter than snow, his face delicate and slender, eyebrows curly and nose straight, more handsome than any exquisite scholar he had ever seen. Zhang CuiShan immediately realized that this scholar is actually a beautiful young woman in disguise.

Wu Dang is very strict when it comes to women. So when Zhang CuiShan saw a lone lady on the boat, his face started to blush bright red. As he quickly got off the boat, Zhang CuiShan said, "I didn't know that you are a woman disguising as a man. Sorry to bother you."

That young woman did not respond. The boat then rowed

away, while the young woman kept playing her zither, singing, "Tonight wish for no more excitement, but there will be many more future nights, under the Six United Pagoda*, weeping willows and rowing boats. How those gentlemen, come to have fun on the water." As the boat disappeared into the darkness, so did the song and the sound of the zither.

*Note: I'm not sure too sure this is the right translation for the particular pagoda. Couldn't find the reason for its name from the encyclopedia, so I just translated word-by-word. Anyway, it's a big tourist attraction at the modern day Hang Zhou city.

Hearing such beautiful melody, after all that killing earlier, Zhang CuiShan could not help but just stand there in silence. Only after over an hour of stillness did he make his way back to the inn.

The next day, everyone found out about the mass murder at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. But with Zhang CuiShan's scholarly appearance, no one even thought he could be the culprit.

At around noon, he started to search for his brothers in the marketplace and at tourist spots. But there are no signs of them anywhere. At dusk, he suddenly remembered the young woman's song: "Tonight wish no more for excitement, but there will be many more future nights, under the Six United Pagoda, with weeping willows and rowing boats. How those gentlemen, come to sightsee." Zhang CuiShan thought, "As long as I act as a gentleman, it would be ok to see her. Sighs, if second and seventh brother were here, we could've gone together. Other than her, I really don't have any other leads."

After eating lunch, Zhang CuiShan began to walk towards the

Six United Pagoda by the QianTang River.

End of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 - Plum Flower Decoration on the Pure White Arm

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan obviously couldn't stop asking now, yet he's too far from the boat to jump on it. So he grabbed two thick branches from a nearby willow tree and threw them onto the river. With the branches as his stepping-stones, Zhang CuiShan jumped onto the head of the boat.

By the time Zhang CuiShan reached the river, it's already dark. Only to see a boat with two bright lanterns on it, the same one he saw last night. Under the lantern lights a young woman sat on the edge, wearing a long, light-green robe, a lady's outfit.

Zhang CuiShan originally planned on asking her about the events last night, but somehow held back upon seeing her in a lady's dress. That young woman looked up in the sky and said, "Sitting on the edge of the boat, thinking of meeting a guest, the wind blows by, waking me up." Zhang CuiShan said, "My name is Zhang CuiShan. I have some questions. I hope you won't mind." That young woman said, "Then please come on the boat." Zhang CuiShan lightly sprung onto the head of the boat.

That young woman said, "Dark clouds hovered over last night's sky, and covered the moon. The weather's much nicer today, now that those clouds have dissipated." Her voice beautiful and clear, spoken while watching the sky, without looking at him even once. Zhang CuiShan said, "May I ask for the young lady's name?" That young woman suddenly turned her head around, her bright, stunning eyes shinned at him, but did not respond. Zhang CuiShan saw her indescribable beauty looking at him, and felt a bit awkward. Afraid to press further, he jumped back onto the land, and began to walk back.

After ten steps or so, his footsteps stopped. Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "Zhang CuiShan, oh Zhang CuiShan. What happened to you? How can a man like you, so experienced in the martial world, be afraid of a young girl?" He turned around, only to see that young woman's boat floated down the river, the jade lanterns lit up the river. Zhang CuiShan couldn't make up his mind, so he simply followed the boat by the river edge.

One on the river, one on land, traveling in parallel fashion. That young lady remained at the head of the boat, her head aimed towards the moon in the night sky.

After walking a while, Zhang CuiShan unconsciously looked in the direction of her eyes, only to see dark clouds gathering in the distance. These clouds quickly covered the moon. Soon, the wind began to blow, and sleek rain came down. There's only grassland by the lake, so Zhang CuiShan could not find any place to hide from the rain. Of course, he didn't care much for the rain anyway. The rainfall was not heavy, but enough to totally soak his body after a while. Only to see that young woman still sitting on the head of the boat, also totally soaked.

Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Young lady, you should enter the cabin to avoid the rain." That young woman immediately stood up and let out an 'Oh!' She quickly gathered herself, and then asked him, "Why are you not afraid of the rain?" As she spoke, she walked into the boat's cabin. After a while, she came out again, this time holding an umbrella, which she threw to him.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed the umbrella, saw that it was made out of oilpaper, and opened it. He saw rivers in the foreground and mountains in the background, covered with willow trees, obviously a scenery painting. Along with the

painting are seven characters, “No need to return simply due light wind and sleek rain*.” It’s not strange to see such paintings and writings on the umbrellas here in HangZhou, as it’s famous for such things. The painting came from a craftsman, so it carried a peculiar craftsman feel to it. What’s amazing is that a craftsman could paint in such an intricate and elegant way. The writing didn’t seem to live up to the standards of the painting, and looked like a rich young lady wrote it, yet at least the style carried a clear, beautiful, unworldly feel.

*Note: The seven characters themselves are ‘Xie2 Feng1 Xi4 Yu3 Bu4 Xu1 Gui1’. Translated literally ‘Tilted Wind Sleek Rain No Need Return’.

Zhang CuiShan did not slow down his steps as he examined the writing, and couldn’t see a ditch in his path. As his left foot came down, Zhang CuiShan felt it land in midair. Any normal person would’ve tripped and fell. But he quickly reacted, applied force to his right foot, jumped up, and landed on the other side of the ditch. Only to hear the young lady yell, “Great!” Zhang CuiShan turned around, saw that she has since put on a bamboo hat, and is standing there on the head of the boat. As her dress waved back and forth among the winds, she looked like a goddess from Heaven.

That young woman said, “Are the painting and writing worthy of Mr. Zhang’s eyes?” Zhang CuiShan never cared much for paintings, as he studied mainly on writings in his life. He said, “These words are written in the famous Mrs. Wei’s style. The characters separate but their meanings connect, the lines are short but their meanings are stretched, very charming with its rhyming.” That young woman felt very happy that Zhang CuiShan understood her writing style, and said, “Among the characters, I thought the character ‘No’ was the worst.” Zhang CuiShan examined that character, and

said, "This 'No' is quite naturally written, but it lacked any deep meaning, unlike the other characters, which leave an aftertaste in the reader's mind, making them hard to forget." That young woman said, "I understand now. I've always thought that this character somehow didn't belong, but couldn't spot the reason. Thank you for enlightening me."

Her boat continued to travel down the river, while Zhang CuiShan walked alongside it. The two people continued to talk about writing, until the sky became so dark they could no longer see each other. That young woman suddenly said, "Speaking with a scholar for just a short while beats reading books for ten years. Thank you for your help. Now let us part." She pulled up the sail, and the boat started to move faster with the aid of the wind. Zhang CuiShan stood as he watched the boat travel further and further away, and felt saddened, his mind in a void. Only to hear the young woman yell from far away, "My surname is Yin... should we meet again, I'll surely ask for more pointers..."

When Zhang CuiShan heard the words 'My surname is Yin', he suddenly remembered, "Wait a minute. Didn't Du DaJin say that a handsome scholar, whose surname is Yin, asked for them to deliver Third Brother Yu? Could he be this young lady in man's clothing?" Once he realized this, he forgot all about the tradition that man and woman should remain apart, and began to chase after the boat. Although the boat traveled very fast, it still could not beat out his lightness kung fu. Soon, he caught up with the boat and asked loudly, "Ms. Yin, do you know my third brother Yu DaiYan?"

That young woman turned around, but did not respond. Zhang CuiShan seemingly heard a sigh, but wasn't sure due to their distance.

So Zhang CuiShan added, "I have this suspicion in my mind,

which I hope you can help clear up.” That young woman said, “Do you really need to know?” Zhang CuiShan said, “Did you ask the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to take my third brother back to Wu Dang? If so, then I would surely repay your kindness.” That young woman said, “Sometimes, it’s so hard to distinguish generosity and cruelty.” Zhang CuiShan said, “My third brother was gravely wounded at the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain. Do you know about this?” That young woman said, “I was saddened too, and is really sorry.”

As they spoke, the wind picked up, and the boat sailed even faster. But Zhang CuiShan had no problem keeping up with the boat.

As they traveled further, the river became wider, the light wind and sleek rain turned into heavy wind and heavy rainstorm.

Zhang CuiShan asked, “Do you know who killed the people in the Dragon Gate Escort agency?” That young woman said, “I made it clear to Du Dajin for him to take good care of Third Hero Yu. Should there be any problems...” Zhang CuiShan said, “You said you’d kill everyone in his agency.” That young woman said, “That’s correct. He didn’t protect Third Hero Yu, so it’s his fault. You can’t blame others.”

Those words sent a chill down Zhang CuiShan’s spine, and he said, “So you’re saying that everyone... everyone was killed by...” that young woman said, “Killed by me!” Zhang CuiShan’s ears trembled. He couldn’t believe that this incredibly beautiful young woman could be such cold-blooded killer. After a while, he said, “What about those two Shaolin monks?” That young woman said, “Also killed by me. I originally didn’t want to bother with them, but they used poisoned darts on me first, so I didn’t have a choice.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Then... then why did they say that I was the

killer?" That young woman said, "Oh, I planned that."

Zhang CuiShan fumed, and yelled, "You planned for them to wrong me like that?" That young woman laughed, and said, "That's correct." Zhang CuiShan yelled angrily, "Surely we're not enemies. So why would you do that to me?"

That young woman waved her hand, and entered the cabin. Zhang CuiShan obviously couldn't stop asking now, yet he's too far from the boat to jump on it. So he grabbed two thick branches from a nearby willow tree and threw them onto the river. With the branches as his stepping-stones, Zhang CuiShan jumped onto the head of the boat. He then yelled, "How... how did you plan it?"

No sound came out from the dark cabin, so Zhang CuiShan planned to go in. But at the last moment he changed his mind, thinking, "It's rude to barge into a young lady's room like that." As he pondered about what to do, he saw a light appearing in the cabin, as a candle lit up.

That young woman said, "Please come in."

Zhang CuiShan organized his robe, closed the umbrella, and walked inside. He immediately froze as he saw a young scholar inside, wearing a green robe, holding a fan, his expression quite colorful. For that young woman had taken this time to change into man's clothing. At first glance, she looked quite like himself. Zhang CuiShan obviously needed no more words to answer his question. In dim conditions, anyone would mistake them to be the same person. No wonder Monk Hui Feng and Du Dajin were both so certain that he was the killer.

That young woman said, "Please sit, Fifth Hero Zhang." She then picked up the teapot and poured some tea into a cup.

Then she reached out to give him the cup. She said, "Sorry we don't have wine here. Let me use tea instead of wine to serve my honored guest."

After hearing such a mannerly speech, Zhang CuiShan could not find a way to release his anger. He finally said, "Thank you." That young woman saw his whole body soaked wet, and said, "I have some clothing in the cabin here. Do you need one? You can change in the back." Zhang CuiShan shook his head and said, "No need." He immediately applied some inner power, and a wave of chi exited his body, releasing much body heat. The water on his robe quickly evaporated. That young woman said, "I forgot that Wu Dang's inner power is one of the best in the martial world. It really was improper of me to ask you to change clothing." Zhang CuiShan asked, "Would you mind telling me which sect you belong to?"

That young woman immediately turned towards the window when she heard the question, her face filled with worry.

When Zhang CuiShan saw this, he stopped pressing further. But after a while, he couldn't help but ask again, "Who injured my third brother Yu? Can you tell me?" That young woman said, "Not only did they fool Du Dajin, they also fooled me. Actually, I should've realized that the seven heroes of Wu Dang would be very elegant and valiant, not crass and unmannerly."

Zhang CuiShan realized that she didn't answer the question, but when she said 'elegant and valiant', he felt his heart jumped, and his head a bit feverish. But he's still not sure what her words meant.

That young woman sighed, and then suddenly lifted up her left sleeve, revealing an arm as white as white-jade. Zhang

CuiShan quickly turned around to avoid her arm. That young woman said, "Do you recognize these hidden weapons?"

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he finally turned around to look at her, only to see three needles on her left arm. Her arm's white as snow, but the area by the needles are black as ink. The tails of all three needles are shaped like plum flowers. Zhang CuiShan immediately stood up, and yelled in shock, "These are Shaolin's Plum Flower Darts. Why... why are they dark?" That woman said, "Exactly. These are Shaolin's Plum Flower Darts. They are poisoned."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin's a very reputable upright sect. Their darts would never have poisons on them. But other than Shaolin disciples, who else can use them? How long have you been poisoned? We need to remedy this immediately."

When that young woman saw the deep concern in his face, she said, "I've been poisoned for over twenty days now, but I have temporarily stopped them from spreading with some medicine. However, I can't pull them out either, since then the poison would spread."

Zhang CuiShan said, "But if you don't pull them out soon, your arm might... your arm might... be much harder to cure. It might leave a nasty mark." Actually, he wanted to say that the arm might become useless.

That young woman began shed some tears, and said faintly, "But I've done all I can... Last night I couldn't find the antidote from those monks... I can never use this arm again." As she spoke, she covered up her arm again.

Zhang CuiShan felt a surge of warmth in his chest, and said, "Ms. Yin, do you trust me? Although my inner power is

ordinary, I am still confident that I can cure your poison.” That young woman smiled innocently, and her cheeks turned pink, as if she’s incredibly happy. Yet she said, “Fifth Hero Zhang. I know you have many suspicions. If I don’t tell you everything, you might regret this decision later.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Saving people is what I’m suppose to do. Why would I regret it?”

That young woman said, “It’s already been over twenty days, so I won’t mind waiting a while longer. Here’s what happened. Once I gave Third Hero Yu to Du Dajin, I followed him from behind. There were quite a few people who wanted to take Third Hero Yu away, but I took care of them. Funny thing is, Du Dajin didn’t know any of this.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The disciples of Wu Dang will never forget your kindness, Ms. Yin.” That young woman said coldly, “Don’t thank me just yet. Soon, you’ll be hating me.” Zhang CuiShan doesn’t know what to make of that statement. That young woman continued, “I kept changing my clothing along the way, sometimes dressed as a farmer, sometimes a businessman, until I followed them to the bottom of the Wu Dang Mountain, where the incident occurred.” Zhang CuiShan bit his teeth and said, “You mean you saw those six beasts? Unfortunately, Du Dajin and his people do not know who they are.” That woman sighed again, and said, “Not only did I saw them, I also fought them. Unfortunately, I also could not tell you much about them either.” She picked up a cup of tea and drank some. Then she continued, “That day I saw these six people come down from the top of the mountain. Du Dajin kept calling them ‘Six Heroes of Wu Dang’, and those six people did not seem to mind. I watched from far away, and saw them take the carriage that carried Third Hero Yu. At first I was relieved to see him arrive safely, but after a while, I realized that things didn’t make sense. The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang treat each other as brothers. They should’ve all gone up to examine his injury, yet only one

person took a look, and without any expression too.”

Zhang CuiShan nodded and said, “Ms. Yin, you really are attentive. Your suspicions are right on the mark.”

That young woman said, “The more I thought about it, the more things didn’t add up. So I turned back and caught up to them, then asked for their names. These people’s eyes were quite sharp, and immediately saw that I was a woman. I shouted at them for pretending to be Wu Dang disciples, and then attacked them. A thirty-some year old skinny man came out to fight me, while a Taoist priest stayed by to back him up. The rest of them went away. This skinny man was quite formidable, and I could not defeat him after thirty or so exchanges. At this moment, that Taoist priest waved his left hand, and my left arm became numb. That skinny man said some indecent words, then tried to capture me. I had to fire off three darts of my own so I could escape.” As she said this, her face turned red. Probably that skinny man sought after her beauty and wanted to rape her.

Zhang CuiShan asked, “Did you say he fired the darts with his left hand? How could Shaolin accept a priest as a disciple?” That young woman said with a smile, “A Taoist has to shave his head to look like a monk, but a monk just needs to put on a Taoist hat to look like a Taoist priest.” Zhang CuiShan nodded. That young woman continued, “I couldn’t beat that skinny man, and that Taoist’s kung fu is even better. So I had to let them go.” Zhang CuiShan wanted to say something, but refrained to do so.

That young woman said, “I know you want to ask why I never went to Wu Dang to explain everything, right? But I couldn’t go to Wu Dang. If I could’ve, why would I ask an escort agency to do it for me? Besides, I overheard Du Dajin talking on my way back. Once I knew that the other Wu Dang heroes

have looked into this matter, I knew there was nothing I could do to help. Since I was also in a hurry to treat my poison, I left. What happened to Third Hero Yu anyway?"

Zhang CuiShan told her what happened afterwards. That young woman sighed, her eyelashes slightly flickered, and said, "Hopefully Third Hero Yu will get well, or... or..." Zhang CuiShan heard the sincerity in her voice, and was deeply moved. He said, "Thank you for your kindness." As he spoke his eyes became wet. That young woman shook her head and said, "When I came back, someone told me that these darts are Shaolin's unique Plum Flower Darts. Other than its own unique antidotes, the poison's incurable. The only place with Shaolin disciples here is the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. So I went there, seeking the antidote. However, they tried to ambush me as I entered."

Zhang CuiShan let out a 'huh' and said, "But didn't you say you purposely planned for them to think it was me?" That young woman blushed, lowered her head, and said softly, "I saw you bought this clothes at the store, and looked very... very dashing, so I went ahead and bought one too." Zhang CuiShan said, "That would explain it. It's just that they're not your mortal enemies, so you really shouldn't kill them all. That's just too cruel and merciless."

The young woman's face sank, and then spoke in a cold voice, "Are you trying to lecture me? Never in my nineteen years in life have I been lectured. I know Fifth Hero Zhang is righteous and kind. You don't have to degrade yourself into associating with people like myself. Please feel free to leave."

After getting scolded, Zhang CuiShan's face turned bright red. He quickly stood up and began to storm out the cabin, but then realized that he promised to cure her poison wound. So he said, "Please lift up your sleeves." That young woman

raised her eyebrows, and said, "Since you like to lecture me so much, I don't want you to cure me anymore." Zhang CuiShan said, "If you leave the wound like that, the poison will eventually spread. By that time, it will be very difficult to cure you."

That young woman said, "So what? If I die from this, it will be because of you." Zhang CuiShan asked with surprise, "What does this have to do with me?" That young woman said, "If I hadn't tried to sent your third brother back, then I would've never have met those six people. If I had decided not to interfere in that matter, I would've never been injured. Besides, had you gotten there sooner, and helped me fight them, how could they have injured me?"

While the last sentence was ludicrous, the previous statements were quite reasonable. Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right. I'll help you right now to repay your kindness." That young woman said, "So do you admit that you're wrong?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Wrong about what?" That young woman said, "You said that I was cruel and merciless. Of course you were wrong. Those monks and all those people in the escort agency deserved to die." Zhang CuiShan shook his head and said, "Although you've been poisoned, you can be cured. My third brother is gravely injured, but probably won't die. Even if we can't cure him, at least we should find the main culprit, instead of killing so many innocents."

That young woman said, "So you say that I killed the wrong people? Isn't it true that it's a Shaolin disciple who poisoned me? Isn't it true that the Dragon Gate Escort Agency is part of Shaolin?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin disciples fill the world. Are you going to kill all of them with a wound on your arm?"

The young woman couldn't win this argument. In anger, she

suddenly lifted up her right hand, and pressed it hard into her left arm, directly over her wounds. With this, her injury magnified.

Zhang CuiShan never in his dreams expected her to do such a thing, that she'd hurt herself over a single argument. Considering how she treated herself, it's hardly surprising that she didn't value the lives of others. He wanted to stop her, but was unfortunately too late. He gasped with surprise, "Why... did you have to do this?" Only to see black blood staining her sleeves. Zhang CuiShan realized that if he doesn't do something quick, her life would be in danger. He quickly grabbed her left hand with his left hand, and his right hand began to tear off her sleeve.

Suddenly, a voice came from behind him, "Hold it right there!" as that person attacked him from behind with a knife. Zhang CuiShan knew he was the boatman, but in this critical moment, he had no time for explanation. With a swift back kick, he kicked the boatmen back out the cabin.

That young woman said, "I don't want you help. My life and death doesn't concern you anyway." As she said this, she promptly slapped him on the cheek. She slapped at lightning speed, and since Zhang CuiShan had not anticipated her attack, he immediately let go of her hand.

That young woman composed herself and said, "Get out of my boat. I never want to see you again!" Zhang CuiShan, ashamed and angry by her slap, said, "Fine! I've never seen such an insolent girl in my life!" And he immediately turned around to leave. That young woman said coldly, "Never seen one before? Well, you saw one today."

Zhang CuiShan picked up a block of wood to help him get back to the banks. But at the last moment he thought, "If I

leave now, she's certainly going to die." With that in mind, he suppressed his anger and went back to the cabin, said, "I'll just forgive you for that slap. Roll up your sleeve quickly. Do you want to keep your life or not?"

That young woman said, "What does my life have to do with you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I must repay you for sending my third brother back." That young woman said coldly, "Oh, you're just trying to repay a debt. Looks like if I hadn't sent back your third brother, you would've just watched me die."

Zhang CuiShan froze a second, and then said, "Not necessarily so." Only to see her body began to shake, signs of the poison spreading. He quickly said, "Hurry! Roll up your sleeves. Do you really have a death wish?" That young woman said while biting her teeth, "If you don't admit that you're wrong, then I won't let you help me." Her face was naturally pale, and under such conditions she looked so very fragile, arousing Zhang CuiShan's compassion.

He sighed, and then said, "Fine. Let's just say I was wrong. Those people all deserved to die." That young woman said, "Not good enough. What's with this whole 'let's just say I'm wrong' deal? And why did you sigh? Wrong is wrong. Say it with some conviction."

In this moment of life and death, Zhang CuiShan can't possibly fuss over such small details. So he yelled, "With the Heaven above and River below listening, I, Zhang CuiShan today wholeheartedly apologize to Yin... Yin..." As he said this, he stuttered. That young woman said, "Yin SuSu." Zhang CuiShan continued, "to Yin SuSu and seek her forgiveness."

Yin SuSu, delighted at his apology, smiled gleefully. Suddenly, her legs gave out on her, and fell back onto a

chair. Zhang CuiShan quickly took out a pill of 'Heaven's Heart Antidote' for her to swallow. Then he grabbed her arm and asked, "How do you feel?" Yin SuSu said, "My chest is burning up inside. Why did it take you so long to apologize? If I die, it will be all your fault."

In this circumstance, Zhang CuiShan could only sooth her with gentle words, "Everything's fine. Don't worry. Just relax your whole body, and don't try to use any energy. Pretend as if you're asleep." Yin SuSu glanced at him and said, "I'll just pretend as if I'm dead."

Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "My gosh, she's so unruly even at this moment. I can't imagine what kind of anguish her future husband would suffer in her hands." As he thought this, he found his heartbeat quickened, and his head feverish. Afraid that Yin SuSu might see through his thoughts, Zhang CuiShan glanced at her, only to see her cheeks bright red, with bashfulness mixed with frailty. When their eyes met, both quickly turned their eyes away.

Yin SuSu suddenly said quietly, "Fifth Brother Zhang, I was very rude, and even hit you. Please... please don't be offended."

When Zhang CuiShan heard her change from calling him 'Fifth Hero Zhang' to 'Fifth Brother Zhang', his heart began to beat quickly. After he took a deep breath, Zhang CuiShan composed himself, exerting his inner chi to his hands, which held Yin SuSu's arm around the poisoned darts.

After a while, thick steam came from the top of his head, signs that he's utilizing his full power. Yin SuSu was grateful in her heart, and knew that this is a critical juncture, refrained from speaking as to not break his concentration. Suddenly, a Plum Flower Dart from her arm shot out, and

black blood sprung out from the wound, turning into red blood a while later. The second dart quickly followed.

At this moment, he heard someone yell from outside, "Is Miss Yin here? Red Sparrow Branch Leader requests a presence." Zhang CuiShan needed to concentrate, and ignored him. He then heard the boatman yell, "There's a thug on the boat. Leader Chang, please come here quick!" The first voice yelled, "Thug, if you hurt a single hair on Miss Yin's head, you'll die a painful death." This person's voice boomed across the river, its sound carried a threatening tone.

Yin SuSu opened her eyes and smiled weakly towards Zhang CuiShan, as if to express an apology. Since her right hand hit her arm at the location of the third Plum Flower Dart, it sank deeper than the other two. Even after three attempts, Zhang CuiShan could not get it out. He then felt another boat nearing, and someone walking onto this boat. But with all his concentration on this last dart, Zhang CuiShan ignored all this.

That person came into the cabin, and saw Zhang CuiShan's hands holding tightly onto Yin SuSu's arm. Obviously he would not believe that Zhang CuiShan's actually trying to heal her. In his hastiness, that person's palm shot out at Zhang CuiShan's back, while yelling, "Still wouldn't release your hands, thug?"

Zhang CuiShan didn't have time to get away, so he simply took a deep breath, and with a loud pop, this palm hit squarely on his back. Zhang CuiShan knew the intricacies of Wu Dang inner power, so he simply stayed still, channeling the force of the blow through his body. Immediately, the third Plum Flower Dart popped out, landing on the floor nearby.

The person who hit Zhang CuiShan was about to follow up

with a second blow, but when he saw the dart he immediately stopped, said, "Miss Yin, Are you... are you injured?" When he saw black blood pouring out her arm, he realized that he mistook this gentleman's intentions, and felt guilty. Considering the power of his palm, he thought that Zhang CuiShan's life was probably in danger. So he quickly took out some medicine for Zhang CuiShan to take.

Zhang CuiShan shook his head, and once the blood pouring out turned to red, released his hands. He turned around and smiled, "That was one powerful blow." That person stood in shock. He thought of how he had killed so many powerful fighters with his palm. Yet this young gentleman could take the full brunt of his attack and act as if nothing happened. He said, "You... you..." He looked at Zhang CuiShan's face, and immediately went to grab his wrist and check his condition. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Why don't I play a joke on him?" Then proceeded to gather his chi and stopped his heartbeat. When that person checked his pulse and found none, he was simply appalled, not knowing what to think.

Zhang CuiShan took the handkerchief Yin SuSu just handed him, and used it to cover her wounds, then said, "Most of the poison had been flushed out. You should recover easily with the aid of common antidotes." Yin SuSu said, "Thank you." She then turned to that other person and said with a solemn expression, "Branch Leader Chang. Meet Fifth Hero Zhang of Wu Dang." That person fell back a step, bowed, and said, "Oh, so it's the fifth hero of the 'Seven Heroes of Wu Dang'. No wonder your inner power is so amazing. My name is Chang JinPeng. Sorry for my rudeness."

Zhang CuiShan looked at this fifty-some year old man, with tight muscles all over his body, looking very strong. He returned with a bow.

Chang JinPeng turned towards Yin SuSu and paid his respects. Yin SuSu nodded, but didn't seem to care much for this man. Only to hear Chang JinPeng say, "Branch Leader Bai had already contacted the Sea Sand Sect, the Huge Whale Clan, and the Divine Fist Sect. The meeting time for showing the saber is tomorrow morning on QianTang river's WangPan island. If my lady's not feeling well, I can send you back home to Lin An. Branch Leader Bai alone should suffice taking care of these people."

Yin SuSu said, "Humph... Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, Divine Fist Sect... Is the head of the Divine Fish Sect Guo SanQuan going to be there too?" Chang JinPeng said, "I heard he personally led his twelve best students." Yin SuSu said, "Although he's quite famous, Guo SanQuan's ability is nowhere near that of Branch Leader Bai. Anyone else important that I should be aware of?" Chang JinPeng said, "I heard two young swordsman from the Kun Lun sect will be there. They said that they want to see the Dragon... Dragon..." He paused here for a moment, and glanced at Zhang CuiShan. Yin SuSu said coldly, "They want to see the Dragon Saber, right? Their hands might become itchy..." When Zhang CuiShan heard the words 'Dragon Saber', his ears perked up. Only to hear Yin SuSu continue, "We can't underestimate these Kun Lun swordsman. My injury's no big deal. Let me see, how about we also go to the meeting. Perhaps Branch Leader Bai could use our help." She turned around and said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fifth Hero Zhang. We should part now. I'll go ahead on Branch Leader Chang's boat. You can take my boat back to Lin An city. After all, there's no reason for Wu Dang to get into all this."

Zhang CuiShan said, "My third brother's injury is seemingly related to the Dragon Saber. Can Miss Yin fill me in on everything?" Yin SuSu said, "I don't know all the details either. Why don't you go back and ask your third brother?"

Zhang CuiShan saw that she wouldn't say, and decided against pressing further. He thought, "The people who hurt my third brother looked like they really wanted the Dragon Saber. From the tone of Branch Leader Chang, the Dragon Saber is in their hands. Should those people know about this, they'd surely come to this meeting." So he said, "Do you think that Taoist priest who fired these darts would also go to WangPan Mountain?"

Yin SuSu showed a slight grin, but did not answer his question. Instead she said, "If you really want to go to this ceremony, then let's go together." She then turned towards Chang JinPeng and said, "Branch Leader Chang. Please lead the way." Chang JinPeng answered, "Yes!" and retreated back out the cabin like servant in front of a master. Yin SuSu only nodded, but Zhang CuiShan respected this old man's martial arts ability. So he personally sent Chang JinPeng out the door.

Yin SuSu looked at the tear on Zhang CuiShan's clothes where Chang JinPeng had hit him. She said, "Take off your long robe. I'll stitch it up for you." Zhang CuiShan said, "No need!" Yin SuSu said, "You don't trust my sewing ability?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "I wouldn't dare." And then remained silent as he thought about all those deaths in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. He normally would have tried to kill anyone capable of such murder. Yet instead he saved this person's life instead. Although he saved her because of her kindness to his third brother, he still realized that good and evil should not mix. Once this deal at WangPan Island is over, he'll leave her immediately.

Yin SuSu saw the surly expression on Zhang CuiShan's face, and immediately what he's thinking. She said, "In addition to all those people in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and those

two Shaolin monks, I also killed Monk Hui Feng.” Zhang CuiShan said, “I thought that was you, except I wasn’t sure how you did it.” Yin SuSu said, “That was hardly difficult to do. I simply stayed by the river and listened in on your conversation. When that Hui Feng monk saw that you weren’t me, I simply gave him a needle in the mouth. You kept on searching for me on the ground and on trees, but I was on the boat the whole time. So of course you couldn’t find me.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Which means that Shaolin would continue to think that I’m the killer. Miss Yin, you are certainly very smart, very cunning.” Yin SuSu ignored his cynical tone, and simply responded with a smile, “Thank you for your compliment!”

Zhang CuiShan became even angrier, and yelled, “Why did you try to frame me? Since when did I ever do anything to you?”

Yin SuSu said with a smile, “I didn’t purposely want to hurt you. But since Shaolin and Wu Dang are known as the two most powerful institutions in the martial world. I really would like to see who would win in a battle.”

After getting over the initial shock, Zhang CuiShan found himself feeling less hatred towards Yin SuSu, but more wary towards her. He thought, “Looks like there’s a huge plan here, much bigger than just trying to hurt me. If Wu Dang and Shaolin really were to fight each other, the martial world would be much less peaceful.”

Yin SuSu remained quite calm, and said, “May I see the designs on your fan?”

Before Zhang CuiShan could respond, they heard someone on Chang JinPeng’s boat yell, “Is this Huge Whale Clan’s boat? Who’s there?” Another voice responded, “This boat

carries the young leader of the Huge Whale Clan. We're here for the meeting on the WangPan Island." The man on Chang JinPeng's boat yell, "The Heavenly Eagle Sect's Miss Yin and Branch Leader Chang of the Red Sparrow Branch are here. Plus there's an honored guest. Please get back behind us." The other person yelled, "If your leader were here, we'd surely let you go first. But no one else is worthy."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Heavenly Eagle Sect? What kind of evil sect is that? How come I've never heard of them? They look to be quite formidable based on what I've seen. This sect must've been established only recently, and stayed mostly in the southern area. Which is why I've never met them." He opened the cabin window and looked outside, only to see a boat with a sculpture of whale carved to its head, and several curved sabers on its side, decorated as whale teeth. This boat had a huge mast, allowing it to sail much faster than Chang JinPeng and his boats.

Chang JinPeng yelled, "Young Leader Mai, Miss Yin's here. How could you not give face to her?" A yellow-robed young man stepped to the front of the whale-boat gave a cold laugh and said, "On land the Heavenly Eagle Sect rules supreme, but on water you think you can compete with us? Why should we give you face on the river?" Zhang CuiShan thought, "This river is so wide hundreds of boats can travel simultaneously. Why do they have to make other boats travel behind them? This Heavenly Eagle Sect really is odd."

By this time, the wind picked up, and the Huge Whale Clan's boat is now way ahead of them. Chang JinPeng let out a 'humph', and said, "Huge Whale Clan... Dragon Saber... also... Dragon Saber..." It's really hard to distinguish what he said with the huge wind and the distance between the boats.

When that Young Leader Mai heard him say 'Dragon Saber'

twice, he became very interested, and ordered his man to sail back towards Chang JinPeng's boat. Once nearly there, he asked, "Branch Leader Chang, what did you say?" Chang JinPeng said, "Young Leader Mai... our Branch Leader Bai... that Dragon Saber..." Zhang CuiShan thought, "That's odd. Why does he speak in fragments?"

Only to see the two boats moving closer and closer together, until they're only a few feet apart. Then suddenly, Chang JinPeng picked up an iron anchor on his boat and threw it onto the other boat, Amidst screaming from two sailors, the anchor swooped down onto the whale-boat.

Young Leader Mai yelled, "What are you doing?" Chang JinPeng didn't respond, instead picked up the second anchor on his boat and also threw it onto the whale-boat, killing three sailors in the process. Now the two boats are locked tightly together. Young Leader Mai tried to pick up the anchor to get it off the boat. Meanwhile, Chang JinPeng waved his right hand, and accompanied by the sound of chains, a dark green watermelon shot out, hitting the main cabin of the Huge Whale Clan's boat. Only then did Zhang CuiShan realize that this watermelon is Chang JinPeng's weapon. It seemed to be made out of steel, two of them total, connected by a long chain. Each one incredibly heavy, at least sixty to seventy pounds. Only someone with incredible strength can make them move with such ease.

After hearing a huge amount of noise, Zhang CuiShan saw that the watermelon had made a cut in the middle of the boat. While the sailors on the boat panicked, Chang JinPeng retracted his watermelon and then threw both onto the back end of the whale-boat. After a while, the boat began to split apart.

That young leader could only watch helplessly as his boat

broke apart.

He yelled some obscenities at Chang JinPeng, who retorted, "As long as Heavenly Eagle Sect's here, we also rule the water!" As he spoke he threw out his watermelons again, this time he made a hole at the bottom of the ship, causing water to begin flooding in.

Young Leader Mai jumped up from his boat towards Chang JinPeng's. Chang JinPeng waited till he's right in the middle of his jump before sending out a watermelon with his left hand. While in midair, this young leader could not hope to dodge the oncoming weapon. He immediately blacked out upon impact and fell back to his own boat.

By now, there are already several holes in the Huge Whale Clan's boat, and its sailors could only try to hold on for dear life. Without needing any orders from Branch Leader Chang, the sailors on his boat retracted their anchors and resumed sailing.

Zhang CuiShan was thoroughly impressed by Chang JinPeng, thinking, "Had my teacher not taught me the intricacies of borrowing force to release force, His attack on my back would've certainly killed me. Not only is this person's kung fu amazing, he's also devious and clever. Must be a powerful person among the evil sects." He turned back and looked at Yin SuSu, only to see her expression calm and ordinary, as if she didn't really care about any of this.

Although these sailors knew how to swim, it's still impossible for them to swim all the way to the side of the river. Many of them cried out for help. Chang JinPeng and Yin SuSu's boats did not bother to stop for any of them.

Zhang CuiShan looked out the window at the broken-down

boat. He felt sorry for these sailors, but knew that considering Chang JinPeng and Yin SuSu's merciless attitude, he could not persuade them to save those people.

Yin SuSu looked at his expression, smiled, and yelled out, "Branch Leader Chang. Our honored guest Fifth Hero Zhang wants to do a good deed. Why don't you save these people?" Zhang CuiShan could not believe that she would speak such words. Only to hear Chang JinPeng say, "I will carry out the request of our guest."

He then yelled, "Listen up people. Wu Dang's Fifth Hero Zhang wants to save your lives. If you value your life, swim towards our boats!" The Huge Whale Clan people immediately swam towards the boats, most of them made it.

Zhang CuiShan's heart warmed, and said happily, "Thank you!" Yin SuSu said coldly, "The Huge Whale Clan kill people like objects. None of them are compassionate people. Why did you want to save them?" Zhang CuiShan was taken aback. He knew that the Huge Whale Clan is one of the four most brutal water clans in the country. Yet for some reason, he actually tried to save them today. Only to hear Yin SuSu say, "Had I not saved them, I bet Fifth Hero Zhang would've scolded me, 'You are such a malicious young woman. I really regret having saved your life.'" Being told exactly what he had been thinking, Zhang CuiShan's face turned red. He said with a smile, "You're so cunning, how can I hope to argue over you? Saving those people will only help you atone for your bad deeds. It has nothing to do with me."

At this moment, the tide roared like thunder, shaking everyone's ears. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could hardly hear each other in this situation. Zhang CuiShan looked out the window, and realized that those people in the Huge Whale Clan who hasn't been saved are likely all dead.

Yin SuSu walked over to the back room, closed the door, and came back out a bit later, this time in woman's clothing. She then made a gesture for him to take off his robe. Zhang CuiShan didn't want to refuse her, and did as he's told. He thought Yin SuSu wanted to mend his robe; instead she actually wanted him to put the robe she just taken off. Afterwards, Yin SuSu took the torn robe into the back room.

With nothing else to wear, Zhang CuiShan could only put on the robe Yin SuSu handed him. This robe is quite big, and he had no problem fitting in it. A faint fragrance came from the robe. Zhang CuiShan's mind shivered, and looked away from her. He simply sat in the cabin pretending to look at the paintings on the wall. But with the huge tide rocking the boat, plus so many worries in his mind, Zhang CuiShan could not enjoy anything at the moment. Yin SuSu did not speak with him either.

Suddenly the boat rocked hard again, even the candle was blown out. Zhang CuiShan thought, "It's bad image for Miss Yin if she and I continue to stay in a dark room like this together." So he opened the cabin door and sat outside, only to see the boatman desperately trying to hold the tiller, rowing the boat under these extreme conditions.

After about an hour, the tidal waves dissipated. A while later, they've arrived at WangPan Island.

The WangPan Island is located right at the mouth of river, where it flowed into the Eastern Sea. The island is filled with stone mountains, seemingly without residents. Two boats docked by the beach. Only to hear a horn blowing in the distance, to see two people waving flags on the beach. As the boat got closer, Zhang CuiShan saw that the two boats both have a large eagle on their flags.

An old man stood on the shore between the two boats. Only to hear him say, "Black Valiant Branch's Branch Leader Bai GuiShou welcomes Miss Yin." His words long but clear, although not too loud, managed to show his impressive inner power. When Yin SuSu's boat docked, he personally put up the plank. Yin SuSu asked Zhang CuiShan to go first, before she walked down to the shore to introduce them.

How nicely Yin SuSu treated Zhang CuiShan, who introduced him to be the fifth hero of Wu Dang, really startled Bai GuiShou. He said, "It really is a pleasure to meet one of the renowned heroes of Wu Dang." Zhang CuiShan returned with some courteous words.

Yin SuSu said with a chuckle, "Your words are so insincere. One's thinking, 'Darn, Wu Dang's also here. Yet another person who wants to steal the Dragon Saber.' The other's thinking, 'Man of an evil sect, I could care less about associating with the likes of you.' If you ask me, you really should just speak your minds."

Bai GuiShou laughed, while Zhang CuiShan said, "I did not mean any disrespect. Branch Leader Bai's kung fu is superb. I was amazed at your ability to stretch your sound across the water. I am only here with Miss Yin, not to take the Dragon Saber."

Yin SuSu's expression brightened considerably upon these words. Bai GuiShou knew of Yin SuSu's icy personality, and was quite shocked that she would warm up to Zhang CuiShan. So one could imagine just how important he is to her. That plus the fact that Zhang CuiShan complimented on his own kung fu lessened Bai GuiShou's enmity towards Zhang CuiShan. He said, "Miss Yin, Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, and Divine Fist Sect's people are all here. Plus

two Kun Lun swordsmen came. These two kids are extremely arrogant, nowhere near as courteous as Fifth Hero Zhang...”

As he said to here, they heard someone yell from behind, “And just how courteous is it to speak foul of others behind the back?” Two men in long, green robes appeared, with swords on their back. Both looked like they were in their late twenties, with an expression as if they want to cause some trouble.

Bai GuiShou said with a smile, “Well, look who’s here. Come, let me introduce everyone.”

Those two started to complain, but stopped when they were captivated by Yin SuSu’s amazing beauty. One simply stared at her. The other turned away immediately after a glance, but kept her in the corner of his eyes.

Bai GuiShou pointed at the man staring at Yin SuSu and said, “This is Swordsman Gao ZeCheng.” Then he pointed to the other man and said, “This is Swordsman Jiang Tao. Both are prestigious members of the Kun Lun Sect. As this is their first visit to the central plains, I’m sure they can show us their incredible swordsmanship.”

His voice was filled with sarcasm and disdain. Zhang CuiShan thought these two people would have drawn their swords, or at least rebutted Bai GuiShou, immediately. Yet for some reason, neither did anything, as if they never heard those words. Then Zhang CuiShan looked at their expressions, and figured out that they were so enchanted by Yin SuSu that they forgot about everything else. Zhang CuiShan chuckled inside, thought, “I’ve always heard that Kun Lun’s a very prominent sect, and is famous for its incredible swordsmanship. Who’d have thought that its disciples would be so ill-disciplined?”

Bai GuiShou then added, "This is Wu Dang's Mr. Zhang CuiShan. This is Miss Yin. This is Branch Leader Chang JinPeng." He did not elaborate on these three people when he made the introduction. In fact, he even changed from calling Zhang CuiShan 'Fifth Hero Zhang' to 'Mr. Zhang', obviously to convey their closeness.

Yin SuSu, pleased at his words, turned to look at Zhang CuiShan with a bright smile.

Gao ZeCheng's jealousy immediately acted up, stared at Zhang CuiShan angrily, and said coldly, "Martial Brother Jiang, I thought I heard back in western regions that Wu Dang is one of the righteous sects in the central plains." Jiang Tao said, "I believe I heard that too." Gao ZeCheng said, "Guess the sayings weren't all that accurate." Jiang Tao said, "Really? Well, it wouldn't be all that surprising, considering these rumors tend to be wrong most of the time. What's this whole deal about Wu Dang anyway?" Gao ZeCheng said, "How could a disciple of a righteous sect mingle with the members of an evil sect? Guess he really likes to sink to their level." They didn't realize that Yin SuSu is also a member of the Heavenly Eagle Sect, and merely implied Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng when they said 'evil sect'.

After hearing these words, Zhang CuiShan immediately became angry. He wanted to rebut, yet stopped himself at the last moment. He thought that since his purpose was to look for Yu DaiYan's killers, there was no need to quarrel needlessly. Besides, the Heavenly Eagle Sect really does deserve the title of an 'evil sect', as Yin SuSu and Chang JinPeng both treat killing people like eating dinner. He certainly should try to associate as little as possible with them. Zhang CuiShan therefore smiled, and responded, "Like my two friends, I'm also just newly acquainted with the

Heavenly Eagle Sect.”

These words really shocked everyone. Bai GuiShou originally thought that Yin SuSu and him were long time friends. He'd never imagine they're newly acquaintances. Yin SuSu became angry immediately, as Zhang CuiShan's words showed blatant disrespect towards the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Gao and Jiang laughed in their minds, thinking, “What a coward. He must be afraid of our Kun Lun Sect.”

Bai GuiShou said, “Looks like everyone's here. We're only missing the young master of the Huge Whale Clan, but let's not wait on him. Everyone can relax for a while, as we'll gather at noon to show the saber.” Chang JinPeng said with a smile, “Young Master Mai's boat had some trouble, but Mr. Zhang helped him out. He's currently on my boat, and will make it to the ceremony.”

Zhang CuiShan saw that these two branch leaders had treated him with great respect, while Yin SuSu's gaze revealed much tenderness. But on further thought, he felt necessary to stay as far away from these people as possible. So he said, “I want to take a stroll alone.” Before anyone could respond, he turned around and started walking into a nearby forest.

Although he felt extremely angry at Yin SuSu's vicious behavior, there's always much warmth in his heart whenever he thought about her. He thought, “This Miss Yin's place in the Heavenly Eagle Sect is very high, but she's not the leader. These two branch leaders treated her like a princess. I wonder what position does she hold?” Then he thought some more, “The Heavenly Eagle Sect obviously want to show off the Dragon Saber, yet they only sent two branch leaders to guard against these other sects. Obviously they felt no need for extra security. Bai GuiShou's kung fu

looks to be even higher than Chang JinPeng. From this I can deduce that the Heavenly Eagle Sect is indeed a very powerful group. I really should know more about them, in case they ever become enemies with Wu Dang.”

As he was thinking, he began to hear weapons clashing in the distance. Out of curiosity, Zhang CuiShan walked towards the sound, only to see Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao practicing swords with each other in the distance, while Yin SuSu watched on the side. Zhang CuiShan thought, “Master always said that Kun Lun sword art is very unique. When he was young, he even fought against a famous Kun Lun Swordsman called the ‘Sword Saint’. It really is an amazing opportunity to see their sword art.” But it’s a big no-no to secretly watch others practice their kung fu, so although Zhang CuiShan really wish to keep watching, he turned away.

However, Yin SuSu had discovered him by now and yelled out, “Come here, Fifth Brother Zhang.” If Zhang CuiShan began to leave now, he’d look like he was peeking. So he had no choice but to walk towards her. Zhang CuiShan said to Yin SuSu, “Since they’re practicing swords, we really should go away as to not distract them.” Before Yin SuSu could respond, a streak of light shined, as Jiang Tao’s sword made a cut on Gao ZeCheng’s left arm, blood came out. Zhang CuiShan froze, thought that Jiang Tao only accidentally injured Gao ZeCheng. Yet Gao ZeCheng didn’t even let out a sound. He simply continued to fight, each sword attack deadlier than the previous one. Zhang CuiShan was shocked to see them actually fighting for real.

Yin SuSu said with a smile, “Looks like the older martial brother is worse than the younger one. Brother Jiang’s sword art is more exquisite.”

When Gao ZeCheng heard these words, he bit his teeth, his

fast sword stretched down at a slanted angle, using the move 'Hundred Meters of Blazing Wind', came slicing down from midair. Zhang CuiShan couldn't help but yell, "Great sword technique!" Jiang Tao immediately evaded, but Gao ZeCheng's just too experienced. In the middle of the technique, he immediately switched to a different technique. The sword tip trembled, piercing into Jiang Tao's left leg. Yin SuSu clapped her hands and said, "Wow, looks like the elder martial brother has a few tricks up his sleeves. Guess he's better after all." Jiang Tao said, "Don't be so sure." And used the technique 'Rain Poured on Flying Flowers'. This technique is very tricky. A real attack hides among seven or eight elegant deceptions to fool the enemy. But since Gao ZeCheng is very familiar with this technique, he was not fooled and blocked every attack. By now, both people are wounded. Although the wounds were not severe, one can still see blood spluttering out from the cuts. Their attacks became more and more ruthless, until near the end they seemingly wanted to take each other's lives. Yin SuSu kept on encouraging them, complimenting a bit on Gao ZeCheng, then a bit on Jiang Tao. The two martial brothers became fueled to the point where they fought as if their lives depended on it.

By now Zhang CuiShan realized that their fight was initiated by Yin SuSu, as revenge for their words against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Although their techniques are intricate, Zhang CuiShan saw that the two martial brothers lacked experience and inner power. So their amazing sword art could only be exerted at about ten to twenty percent capacity.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands and smiled brightly, as if she's very happy. She said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, what do you think of their Kun Lun sword arts?" Before he could respond, she had turned her head around. When she saw the disgusted look on Zhang CuiShan's face, she added, "Actually, their

techniques are all crap. Let's go watch the scenery over there at the beach." Without waiting for his response, Yin SuSu grabbed Zhang CuiShan's hand and began to leave.

Zhang CuiShan's heart stirred as her soft hand gripped his own. Although he knew she was using him to further ridicule Gao and Jiang, he still could not bring himself to break himself apart, willingly followed her to the beach.

Yin SuSu stared into the distant sea, then suddenly said, "In the chapter 'Water in Autumn' of the book Zhuang Zi, there's a passage which says, 'All the waters in the world, none more than in the sea, thousands rivers flow here, not knowing when they could stop but not overflow.' But the sea is not proud. It says, 'I belong between the sky and the earth, just like small rocks and small plants are between the sky and the earth.' Zhuang Zi really is an incredible book. Its philosophies are so deep and so overwhelming."

Zhang CuiShan had been quite mad at her for inciting Gao and Jiang into fighting, but could not help but froze at these words. Zhuang Zi is a must-read for all Taoists. When Zhang CuiShan was at Wu Dang Mountain, Zhang SanFeng had used it often to explain philosophies to his students. He could not imagine this devilish lady could recite such words. After he regained his composure, Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, 'walking a thousand miles, would not match its immensity, climb up a thousand steps, would not match its depth.' "

As Yin SuSu heard his quoted description of the sea from 'Water in Autumn', she saw a deep admiration on his face. She said, "Are you thinking of your master?"

Deeply shocked, Zhang CuiShan unknowingly reached out with his right hand and grabbed hers. He asked, "How do you know?" Years before, when he and his martial brothers were

reading this book, Yu DaiYan commented on this exact passage. He said at the time, "As we learn more and more, it appears as if we're moving backward. The more we learn, the more apart we seem to be from master. These words described master's bottomless, unparalleled martial arts perfectly." Both Song YuanQiao and Zhang CuiShan nodded in agreement. So when he recited those words just now, Zhang CuiShan immediately thought of his master Zhang SanFeng.

Yin SuSu said, "Based on your expression, you must be either thinking of your parents, or a Wu Dang elder. But other than Taoist Zhang SanFeng, who else on this world can be described as 'walking a thousand miles, would not match its immensity'?" Zhang CuiShan said happily, "You're really smart." But then quickly realized that it was not courteous to have grabbed her hands.

Yin SuSu said, "Just how good is your master's martial arts anyway? Can you tell me?" Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "It's not just martial arts. His knowledge is so broad and so deep that I can't even begin to describe." Yin SuSu smiled, said, "The scholar walks, the scholar moves faster, the scholar dashes, the scholar like a spirit flies into the distance, disappearing just as I look up." This quote was made by Yan Hui in Zhuang Zi to compliment his master, Confucius. After hearing her describe his master this way, especially as Zhang CuiShan himself felt this towards Zhang SanFeng, he said, "My master doesn't even have to fly. He simply needs to walk for me to fall behind."

With Yin SuSu's cleverness, plus her wish to get on Zhang CuiShan's good side, they had no trouble carrying on an excellent conversation. Sitting side by side on a large stone, the two forgot the outside world as they conversed.

After a while, loud footsteps came from faraway, followed by someone clearing his throat, and said, "Mr. Zhang, Miss Yin, it's noon now. Please follow me to the place where we'll hold the ceremony." Zhang CuiShan turned around, and saw Chang JinPeng standing ten paces behind them. Although his expression is in a very respectful manner, there's a slightly grin on his face, looking like an old man being happy to see a lovely young couple together. Although Yin SuSu had always viewed him as a subordinate, she still could not help but blush at this moment, and turn away. Zhang CuiShan's cheek turned red upon seeing them, even if he's sure of his own integrity.

Chang JinPeng turned around to lead them. Yin SuSu whispered to him, "Let me go first, so they won't see us together." Zhang CuiShan thought, "Since when did this young woman became so shy?" But he nodded anyway. Yin SuSu caught up with Chang JinPeng, asked, "What happened to those two Kun Lun idiots anyway?" Zhang CuiShan's thoughts were filled with mixed emotions as he watched them disappear into the trees. Then he followed them into the mountain valley.

Upon entering the valley, he saw a grassy plain filled with several tables. Other than an elegant table to the east, all others were filled. When Chang JinPeng saw him walking near, he yelled, "Here comes Wu Dang's Fifth Hero Zhang!" He spoke these words clearly and loudly, his voice vibrated between the mountains. After the introduction, Chang JinPeng and Bai GuiShou came up to greet him. Bai GuiShou said, "Branch Leader Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng, under Sect Leader Yin, welcome Fifth Hero Zhang to our ceremony."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Ah, so the their leader's surname really is 'Yin'!" He responded, "Thank your for welcoming me here." As he walked passed by the other tables, Zhang

CuiShan saw everyone staring at him strangely, but didn't thought much of it. He did not know that none of the other people here were so seriously greeted as he had been, with both branch leaders and all their sub-leaders welcoming him personally. For the other groups, only one or two sub-leaders had greeted them.

Bai GuiShou showed him to the table that wasn't taken, on the east side. This table only has one chair, but nonetheless the most elegant one. Zhang CuiShan looked around, and saw around six or seven people at each other table. Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao sat at the sixth table. Zhang CuiShan said, "I really don't deserve such a seat. Brother Bai, please move me somewhere else." Bai GuiShou said, "Wu Dang is one of the most highly respected institutions in the martial world. That plus Fifth Hero Zhang's fame, you're more than qualified for this seat." Zhang CuiShan remembered his master's lesson on modesty, thought, "If big brother or master were here, they could certainly sit here. But I certainly do not deserve it." So he once again refused the seat.

Gao ZeCheng gave Jiang Tao a glance. Then Jiang Tao picked up his chair and threw it at Zhang CuiShan's table, over five other tables. It landed perfectly in place, demonstrating his exquisite palm ability and inner power. Gao ZeCheng yelled, "Humph, 'most highly respected institution'? I wonder if Wu Dang's really worthy of the title. If you, Mr. Zhang, refuse to sit there, then let us brothers take your place." The two flew like the wind over to Zhang CuiShan's table, next to the chairs.

For you see, Yin SuSu had told them earlier that she wanted to learn some Kun Lun sword art. Both brothers immediately pulled out their swords and began to show her their sword techniques. At first, they simply wished to get the upper

hand and gain her favor. But with Yin SuSu adding fuel to fire with her words, the duel quickly got out of hand. Only when Yin SuSu left with Zhang CuiShan did the two realize that they had been duped. Obviously, the two were extremely angry, but neither could act up towards Yin SuSu. So they tried to take Zhang CuiShan's seat in an effort to make him fight them, then they can make him look bad here in public.

Chang JinPeng put up a hand to stop them, said, "Hold on!" Gao ZeCheng was about to object, when Zhang CuiShan said, "If the two honored guests wish to sit here, then go ahead. I'll switch seats with you!" As he spoke he began to walk towards the sixth table where the Kun Lun brothers were sitting. Yin SuSu suddenly waved her hand at him, yelled, "Fifth Brother Zhang, come here."

Zhang CuiShan wasn't sure what she wanted to say, so he went to her side. Yin SuSu pulled up a chair and put it by her seat, said, "Why don't you sit here?" Zhang CuiShan never imagined that she would say such a thing. Under the stares of others, he could not decide what to do. Agreeing would make it seem as if they have an intimate relationship, while refusing would make her look very bad. Yin SuSu whispered, "I need to speak to you about several matters." Zhang CuiShan saw a hint of begging in her gaze, softened his heart, and sat down on the chair. Yin SuSu, euphoric at his decision, poured a cup of wine for him to drink.

Although they managed to grab the main table, Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao now felt even angrier, but could not act up in public. Bai GuiShou swept some dust off the chairs and said with a smile, "If the Kun Lun guests wish to sit here, then be my guest. Please, sit!" As he spoke the people from the Heavenly Eagle Sect returned to their seats. Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao thought, "This worthless fellow is too scared to sit here. So obviously his Wu Dang sect is lesser

than our Kun Lun sect.” The two looked at each other, and sat down.

Only to hear a loud cracking noise, the chairs broke under them, and the two brothers stumbled to the ground, looking very awkward. But with their solid martial arts, the two quickly regained composure and got back up. Even so, everyone at the ceremony began to laugh wildly. Gao and Jiang realized that Bai GuiShou did something to the chair while dusting it. They both suddenly become conscious of just how powerful Bai GuiShou’s inner power was, much more powerful than either could’ve imagined.

Only to hear Bai GuiShou said coldly, “We all know that the Kun Lun martial arts is amazing. You don’t have to beat up on two chairs to prove it. Besides, everyone can do this simple chair-breaking kung fu anyway, right?” He waved his right hand and spoke to the ten sub-leaders under his command, “Why don’t you all try it out?”

Only to hear numerous cracking sounds, as ten chairs immediately broke apart. Those ten sub-leaders remained upright throughout the whole process, not moving a tiny bit while their chairs crumbled. Obviously this made them look much better than Gao and Jiang. Everyone here realized that Bai GuiShou was purposely making Gao and Jiang look bad. But the scene really was very entertaining, so they could not hold back their laughter.

Amidst the laughter, two sub-leaders each carried a large rock towards the main table, kicked away the scraps of the broken chairs. One said, “I’m sorry that our wooden chairs could not support the two honored guests. How about sitting on this rock instead?” These two people are renowned strongmen in the Heavenly Eagle Sect. So although their martial arts are plain, they still have the innate strength to

carry these two huge rocks, each no less than four hundred pounds. They walked in front of the two Kun Lun brothers, seeking to hand the rocks to them.

The exquisite Kun Lun sword skills, unfortunately, would not be of any help to Gao and Jiang when it comes to catching rocks. Gao ZeCheng yelled, "Put that down!" The two strongmen did not listen, instead they raised the rocks above their heads and yelled, "Take it!"

When they said this, Gao and Jiang immediately retreated a few steps. They were afraid that the two strongmen did not have enough strength, and might accidentally drop the rocks onto them. Although extremely angry, Gao and Jiang did not dare attack the two strongmen.

Bai GuiShou said, "If the two Kun Lun guests do not want to sit down, perhaps we should give these chairs to Mr. Zhang!"

Zhang CuiShan had been sitting by Yin SuSu, taking in her fragrance, feeling heavenly in his heart, without a care for the outside world. When Bai GuiShou yelled out his name, Zhang CuiShan quickly returned to reality, and thought, "I can't fall into this demonic trap, and be so closely associated with this evil sect's lady demon." So he immediately got up and walked over.

Although he had heard Chang JinPeng compliment Zhang CuiShan's ability, Bai GuiShou had never seen anything himself. At this moment, he wanted to try Zhang CuiShan out. So he gave the two strongmen a meaningful glance.

The two strongmen understood his intentions, walked over to Zhang CuiShan, and yelled together, "Be careful, Mr. Zhang. Please take it!" The two people bent their knees, then used their legs' power to help throw the rocks upward and forward,

aimed towards Zhang CuiShan.

When the crowd saw this, they unwittingly all stood up to look.

Bai GuiShou originally planned to simply test Zhang CuiShan's martial arts, and not out of malevolence. One reason is out of curiosity, as 'Wu Dang's Seven Heroes' are too famous in the martial world. Another is because Bai GuiShou could not believe the famous Zhang CuiShan is actually a scholarly looking person. Finally, he saw that the icy cold Yin SuSu, who don't seem to care for anyone, was extremely thoughtful and gentle towards this 'Fifth Hero Zhang'. This meant that Zhang CuiShan would likely be an important character for the Heavenly Eagle Sect later on. But now as he watched the two stones headed towards Zhang CuiShan, Bai GuiShou began to regret his decision. Being a renowned Wu Dang disciple, Zhang CuiShan could surely dodge the rocks, but doing so would make him look bad. Zhang CuiShan and surely Yin SuSu would both be extremely angry. He instantly made up his mind, that should something go wrong, he would immediately put the blame on the two sub-leaders. Better execute them than face the wrath of Miss Yin.

Zhang CuiShan was very shocked to see two rocks about to fall on top of him. He couldn't get out of the way, for then he'd look no better than the Gao and Jiang, making Wu Dang look bad. So without much thought, Zhang CuiShan called upon all his powers at this critical moment. His left hand wrote the right-hook in the character 'martial', redirecting the movement of the left rock. His right hand wrote the left-slant in the character 'saber', bringing along the right rock. The force of the two huge rocks falling down is quite enormous. Zhang CuiShan's strong point is certainly not his arm strength. So for him to even catch one rock would be

impossible. Fortunately, he has learnt the techniques Zhang SanFeng created from characters, which are some of the deepest martial arts philosophies in the world. The basis of Wu Dang's martial arts lies not with speed, nor with power. Rather, it is all about the intricacies of using force. If one can apply the right amount of power at the right time, he can 'move thousands of pounds using ounces of force'. Through years of learning and experience, Zhang CuiShan can use this concept readily. Borrowing the innate force of the throw, Zhang CuiShan easily redirected the directions of the two rocks directly upward.

As his long sleeves danced, the hands hidden inside the sleeves, from onlookers' view, seemingly had caught the rocks, only to hurl them up once again. The two rocks went up one after the other, then began to descent. Zhang CuiShan floated up, until he sat down upon the higher of the two rocks.

Only to hear a loud thud, as the bottom rock hit the ground, making a huge dent in the ground. Immediately afterwards, the top rock fell on top of the bottom one, with Zhang CuiShan sitting calmly on top. He said with a smile, "The two sub-leaders' strengths are astounding. You have my admiration."

Those two sub-leaders could only stare at him in silence, unable to get over the shock of what had happened.

For a while, the whole place remained silent. Then everyone started to applaud, which lasted for a long time.

Yin SuSu glanced at Bai GuiShou, her expression positively delightful. Bai GuiShou was thrilled that his 'mistake' now turned into a big favor for Miss Yin. He picked up a cup of wine, walked towards Zhang CuiShan's table and said, "I've

long heard of Fifth Hero Zhang's fame, but only today was I able to personally see your amazing kung fu. Here's a toast for you." As he spoke he drank the wine. Zhang CuiShan said, "You're too flattering!" and drank a cup of wine in turn.

Bai GuiShou walked to the middle of the gathering, yelled, "My sect has recently acquired a new saber, called the Dragon Saber. Some have said, 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow!'" He paused slightly here, his eyes swept through the entire field, letting the words sink in. Then he added, "Our Leader Yin originally planned for heroes everywhere to meet on Heavenly Eagle Mountain, so they can see our Dragon Saber. However, that would take too long to plan. We want some of our close friends to see the saber first, and spread the good word for us." He waved his hands, and eight disciples walked into a nearby cave.

Everyone looked at these eight disciples, thinking they went in to grab the saber. Instead, they came out carrying a huge iron pot. They used poles to lift the pot, as to avoid the giant fire burnt within. The eight disciples put the pot in the middle of the gathering. Everyone sitting immediately felt the warmth of the fire. After those eight people left, four more came, carrying a large iron anvil, while two others carried two heavy hammers.

Bai GuiShou said, "Branch Leader Chang, please show us the Dragon Saber!"

Chang JinPeng said, "As you wish!" He turned around and yelled, "Get me the saber!"

The two strongmen walked into the cave. When they reappeared, one carried a yellow package, while the other guarded him. That sub-leader handed the package to Chang

JinPeng, and retreated to his side. Chang JinPeng opened the package to reveal a single saber. Under the gaze of the audience, he unsheathed the saber, said, "This is the famous Dragon Saber. Watch closely!" He held the saber above his head, as if showing great respect.

Everyone here had long known about the Dragon Saber, but saw that this black saber looked quite plain. They all wondered whether this saber was real or not. Only to see Chang JinPeng give the saber to the strongman on the left, and said, "Test the hammer!"

That strongman grabbed the saber and put it on the anvil, the sharp edge facing up. The other strongman raised the iron hammer, brought it down upon the saber. Only to hear a soft scratching sound, the hammer split in half, one side stuck to the anvil, the other fell to the ground. Everyone gasped, stood up, and thought, "It's not incredibly rare to see precious swords cut through gold or jade. But to cut through an iron hammer like tofu, without making much of a sound, is simply unheard of.

Two people from the Huge Whale Clan and the Divine Fist Sect went up to examine the broken hammer, saw that the cut was clean and shiny, meaning that it was recently made.

That strongman grabbed another large hammer, and once again brought it down upon the saber, with the same result.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "I can't believe there exist a saber as sharp as this one."

Chang JinPeng grabbed the saber and with a seemingly light stroke cut the anvil in half. He then went to the nearby forest, and in a single swoop, used the saber to cut through eighteen trees. But oddly enough, none of the trees even

moved. Just as the crowd was wondering, Chang JinPeng pushed one of the trees slightly, and the top part came down. The saber did indeed sliced through all the trees. But since it was so sharp, and Chang JinPeng's slice was horizontal, the trunks did not fall down upon cut. Heavy wind came at this moment, the rest of the trees fell.

Chang JinPeng let out a hearty laugh, waved his hand, and threw the Dragon Saber into the iron pot.

Suddenly, loud cracking noises came from afar, as if someone else is also cutting down trees. Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng looked at each other, then stared into the distance, only to see the ships' masts all falling down one after another. Not knowing what's going on, each sect sent some people to the dock to see what's going on.

Only to hear loud noises continue, as if the boats were all sailing within a thunderstorm. One after the other, the boats sank. Everyone gathered froze, not knowing what to say. At first, they thought it was some trick by the Heavenly Eagle Sect. But once they saw the Heavenly Eagle Sect ships sinking, they felt something else is going on.

The sects sent a second group of people to check on things. Again, no one came back.

Bai GuiShou said to one of the sub-leader, "Go check it out." That sub-leader did as told. Bai GuiShou then turned to the audience, said with a smile, "Looks like there's something odd going on at the beach. Don't worry. Even if the boats are ruined, we can always make more. Come, let's drink!" Although everyone's uneasy about the situation, none wants to show weakness in front of others. So they all picked up their cups for a drink. Suddenly a loud scream came from afar.

Chang JinPeng and Bai GuiShou both realize that this was the scream of the sub-leader they sent out. Then, heavy footsteps could be heard, followed by the appearance of a heavily wounded man, indeed the sub-leader they sent out.

He held his hand over his eyes, as blood poured out the numerous heavy scratches on his body. He yelled, "Golden-Haired Lion King! Golden-Haired Lion King!" Bai GuiShou asked, "Did you say it's a lion?" He calmed down a bit hearing it was just an animal. That sub-leader said, "No! No! He was a person. He clawed to death all the people. He sank all the boats!" At this moment, his body fell to the ground, dead.

Bai GuiShou said, "Let me go see what happened." Chang JinPeng said, "I'll go with you." Bai GuiShou said, "You should stay and protect Miss Yin." He knew that the dead sub-leader's kung fu is quite formidable. Anyone capable of decapitating him like that must be very powerful. Chang JinPeng nodded and said, "Yes!"

Suddenly they heard a voice, "Golden-Haired Lion King is already here!" Everyone gasped, only to see a man appear from behind the trees. He was tall and massive, with yellow hair over his head, his eyes shined, in his hand is a three-meter long mace. The way he stood and looked gave off the aura of a war god from Heaven.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Golden-Haired Lion King? He must've gotten the nickname from his yellow hair. But who is he? Master never mentioned someone like him."

Bai GuiShou went up to him and asked, "May I have your name?" That person said, "My surname is 'Xie', given name is 'Xun'. I also have a nickname called 'Golden-Haired Lion

King’.” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, thought, “This person looks very coarse, but his name is quite elegant. His nickname is much more fitting.” Hearing him very mannerly, Bai GuiShou said, “So it is Mr. Xie. I do not believe that we have met. So why did you come to this island and start killing people?”

Xie Xun smiled, showing bright white teeth. He looked around and said, “Why did everyone else come here?”

Bai GuiShou thought, “There’s no reason to hide the truth from him. Although his kung fu is formidable, he still can’t possibly defeat Chang JinPeng and myself combined, with the help of Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin.” He said, “The Heavenly Eagle Sect recently acquired a precious saber. We simply asked our friends to come take a look.”

Xie Xun examined the saber currently lying inside the huge iron pot. Its ability to keep its natural color under so much heat certainly demonstrated the saber’s value. He began to walk towards the pot.

Chang JinPeng saw his intentions, blocked the way, yelled, “Stop!” Xie Xun chuckled, said, “What do you want?” Chang JinPeng said, “This saber belongs to the Heavenly Eagle Sect. You can certainly examine it, but you cannot take it.” Xie Xun said, “Did you make the sword? Or bought it?” Chang JinPeng could not respond. Xie Xun continued, “You also took it from someone else. So if I take it from you, it’s hardly unfair. So why can’t I do it?” As he spoke he went to grab the saber.

Chang JinPeng took out the watermelons from his waist, yelled, “Mr. Xie, if you don’t stop right now, I shall be obligated to use force.” Even as he spoke his warning, his watermelon had shot out. Xie Xun did not even turn around. He simply waved his mace behind him, blocked the

watermelon and redirected it back towards Chang JinPeng. Chang JinPeng gasped, quickly threw out his other watermelon to block the one headed towards him. Unfortunately, Xie Xun's power is just too strong. Upon impact, the second watermelons changed its directions too, and both now came back towards him. In an instant, they hit Chang JinPeng directly on the chest, killing him instantly.

This sudden change of events shocked Chang JinPeng's five sub-leaders. They immediately attacked Xie Xun. Xie Xun's left hand grabbed the Dragon Saber, and then tipped over the iron pot with his mace. The fallen pot immediately hit three sub-leaders. Then it began to roll on the ground, hitting the other two. Four sub-leaders died immediately, while the fifth caught fire, and rolled on the ground in extreme pain.

Everyone's gasped at what has happened. Zhang CuiShan had seen many powerful fighters in the martial world, but never someone of Xie Xun's caliber. He knew that he has no chance against Xie Xun. Even his big brother and second brother would not likely defeat him either. Other than his master, Zhang CuiShan could not think of a second person that is this man's match.

Only to see Xie Xun examine the saber, lightly flicked it with his fingers. He nodded, said, "Amazing, amazing saber!" He raised his head, looked at sheath besides Bai GuiShou, said, "Is this the Dragon Saber's sheath? Give it to me."

Bai GuiShou realized that in this situation, he's pretty much likely to be dead no matter what. If he handed Xie Xun the sheath, his fame would go down the drain, and will likely die a terrible death when the sect leader finds out. But of course, to disobey this man would mean certain death right now. So he said, "If want to kill me, just go ahead. Do you think I am afraid of death?"

Xie Xun let out a smile, said, "Oh, a tough guy! Looks like there are some characters in the Heavenly Eagle Sect." Suddenly he threw the Dragon Saber towards Bai GuiShou. With the Dragon Saber coming at him, Bai GuiShou wouldn't dare block it with a weapon, nor try to catch it. He quickly evaded to the side. In a flash, 'swoosh', the saber entered the sheath on the table. It continued to fly forward with the momentum, until Xie Xun grabbed the saber with one of the spikes on his mace, causing it to fly backward, until it entered his hand again. Everyone was astonished by this strange way of sheathing a saber.

Xie Xun looked left and right, said, "Is there anyone else who object to me taking this saber?" He asked this question twice, without getting a single response.

Suddenly, a person from the Sea Sand Sect table rose, said, "Elder Xie is famous throughout the world. Of course, this saber should belong to Elder Xie. None of us would dare object." Xie Xun said, "You are the chief helmsman of the Sea Sand Sect Yuan ChangBuo, right?" That person said, "Yes." He was both happy and terrified that Xie Xun knew his name.

Xie Xun said, "Do you know who my teacher was? Which sect I belong to?" Yuan ChangBuo stuttered, "Well... Elder Xie..." Actually, he knows nothing about Xie Xun. Xie Xun said coldly, "If you don't know anything about me, then why do you say that I am famous throughout the world? I absolutely abhor people like you. Get out here!" His last sentence roared like thunder in everyone's ears. Yuan ChangBuo, scared of his power, obediently got up and stepped forward with his head down.

Xie Xun said, "The martial arts of the Sea Sand Sect is mediocre, but specializes in harming people using poisonous

salt. Last year you killed Zhang DengYun's family in the town of Yu Tao. Just this last month you killed Sea Gate Sect's OYang Qin. Am I correct?" Yuan ChangBuo gasped, thought that considering how secretive these two cases were, how could Xie Xun have known about them? Xie Xun said, "Get your subordinate to bring out two large bowls of your salt. I want to see what it is." Everyone in the Sea Sand Sect carries poisonous salts with him. Yuan ChangBuo wouldn't dare disobey, so he could only ask his subordinates to bring out the salts, filling two large bowls.

Xie Xun picked up one bowl and smelled it, then said, "We'll each eat a bowl." He put the mace on the ground, picked up Yuan ChangBuo, held down his chin, and stuffed an entire bowl of the salt down his throat.

The deaths of the Zhang DengYuan family and OYang Qin were two unsolvable cases of the martial world in recent years. Both Zhang and OYang's reputations were quite good. No one knew that the Sea Sand Sect's Yuan ChangBuo killed them. Zhang CuiShan was actually happy to see him being force-fed poisonous salt.

Xie Xun picked up the other bowl, said, "I've always been a fair person. If you eat bowl, so will I." He opened his mouth and poured the whole bowl into his mouth.

No one expected this turn of events. Zhang CuiShan saw that although he's quite vicious, Xie Xun had quite a bit of righteousness in him. Besides, the people he's been killing were all terrible people anyway. Overall, Xie Xun left a favorable impression in Zhang CuiShan's mind. At this moment, Zhang CuiShan couldn't help but yell, "Elder Xie, this person deserves to die. You don't need to be fair with him." Xie Xun turned to look at him, asked, "Who are you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I am Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan." Xie

Xun said, "Oh, Fifth Hero Zhang of Wu Dang. Are you also here to take the Dragon Saber?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I came to look for more information regarding my third brother's injury. If you know something about this, please tell me."

Before Xie Xun could respond, Yuan ChangBuo screamed in pain, held his stomach tightly while rolling back and forth on the ground. After a while, he stopped struggling, and died. Zhang CuiShan quickly said, "Elder Xie. Hurry up and take an antidote."

Xie Xun said, "What's the need? Give me some wine!" The Heavenly Eagle Sect member responsible for taking care of guests quickly brought a bottle of wine over. Xie Xun said, "Is the Heavenly Eagle Sect this stingy? Give me a big bowl!" That person then brought a big bowl and courteously put it in front of Xie Xun, but thought, "Drinking wine right after being poisoned, are you afraid that you won't die quickly enough?"

Only to see Xie Xun chug the whole bowl down his throat. This bowl held at least twenty-some pounds of wine, yet he managed to drink it all up in one gulp. He patted his stomach, opened his mouth, and a streak of liquid came out, hitting Bai GuiShou's chest. Bai GuiShou felt like being hit by continuous streaks of iron pellets. Despite his high inner power, Bai GuiShou eventually began to falter, and then fell to the ground, unconscious.

Xie Xun then turned upward, as the wine shot up and came down like rain over the Huge Whale Clan's people. They all felt an unbearable odor coming from the water. Those without good inner power fainted. When the wine had entered Xie Xun's stomach, it cleansed the stomach of the poisonous salt, turning the wine into poisonous wine. Then

Xie Xun released it back out using his inner power, leaving very little in his stomach. Considering his inner power, this amount of poison could not hurt him at all.

The leader of the Huge Whale Clan, upon seeing Xie Xun mock his clan this way, stood up in anger. But then thought better of it, and sat back down.

Xie Xun said, "Clan Leader Mai, you plundered a seagoing ship this May, didn't you?" Mai Jing's face turned pale, said, "That's correct." Xie Xun said, "I know you are pirates. If you don't plunder ships, then there's no way for you to make a living. I don't blame you for that. But to throw tens of innocent passengers overboard, raping and killing seven women aboard the ship... don't you think that is way too cruel?" Mai Jing said, "Well... well... these are done by my subordinates. I... I didn't participate." Xie Xun said, "Your subordinates are a vicious lot, yet you do not discipline them. Isn't that just as bad as you yourself doing these deeds?"

Mai Jing thought of his situation, wished only for his own survival, took out his saber, said, "Cai Si, Hua QingShan, HaiMa HuLiu, I remembered that you three participated in that day's events!" In three flashes, he cut down three people. These blows came so quick those three people had no chance to retaliate, all died immediately.

Xie Xun said, "Good! Except it came too late, and against your own will. Had you killed these people at the time, I wouldn't be here to duel with you today. Leader Mai, what is your most accomplished martial art?"

Mai Jing thought, "I probably can't last even three exchanges if I fight him on land. But on water, he's no match against me. Even if I can't beat him, at least I can swim away. Or could he swim faster than me too?" He said, "I want to see

the elder's underwater kung fu."

Xie Xun said, "Fine, let's duel underwater." He walked a few steps, suddenly stopped, said, "Hold on. If I leave, these people here might escape!"

Everyone quivered, thought, "He's afraid that we'll escape? Does that mean he wants to kill us all?"

Mai Jing said in a hurry, "Actually, I'm no match for Elder Xie underwater either. I'll admit defeat." Xie Xun said, "Really? Well, that saves me some time. Go ahead and kill yourself and be done with all this." Mai Jing was taken aback, said, "But... but it's just a duel. There's no reason for the loser to commit suicide upon defeat..."

Xie Xun yelled, "Don't give me that crap! You think you're worthy of dueling me? I'm here to take your life. For people like us who practice martial arts, it's not a big deal for us to shed some blood. But I only kill people who knows kung fu, and despise those who oppress the weak, kill innocent civilians. I will not let anyone who have done these things get away."

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he couldn't help but glance at Yin SuSu, thought that she did indeed kill many innocents at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. If Xie Xun knew about that, he would have to kill her too. Only to see Yin SuSu's face pure white, her lips shivering. Zhang CuiShan thought again, "If Xie Xun really tried to take her life, would I protect her? If I did, then I would surely die. Besides, she would deserve it, but... but... can I really stand and watch him kill everyone like this?"

Only to hear Xie Xun said, "Except I want you to die without regret, which is why I challenge you to your best martial arts

skills. If you know of any skill you can best me at, I'll let you go."

As he spoke, he grabbed two piles of dirt from the ground and mixed them with some wine, making two piles of mud. He said to Mai Jing, "Let's see how long you can last without breathing. Let both of us cover our noses and mouths with these mud. Whoever couldn't stand the lack of air first kills himself." Without even asking for Mai Jing's approval, he put one pile of mud over his nose and mouth, while slapping the other pile over Mai Jing's.

Although everyone thought this scene is pretty funny, no one could laugh out loud.

Mai Jing took a deep breath right before the mud covered him. Then he sat down in a meditating position, motionless. He's been catching fish under water since he was seven, and has amazing marine skills. Therefore, he was quite certain that there's no way he could lose this duel, waited peacefully on the ground.

Xie Xun, though, could not sit peacefully. He walked in front of the Divine Fist Sect's table, stared at its leader Guo SanQuan.

Guo SanQuan* felt very uneasy under Xie Xun's gaze. He stood up and said, "How are you, Elder Xie. I am Guo SanQuan."

*Note: 'San' means 'three' and 'Quan' means 'fist'.

Xie Xun could not speak, but held out his right hand, dipped it into some wine, then wrote three characters on the table." Guo SanQuan's face turned gray immediately, looking like he just saw a ghost. His disciples all looked at the words, saw them to be 'Cui Fei Yan'. His disciples thought, " 'Cui FeiYan'

is a woman's name. Why would the master be so afraid of these characters?"

Guo SanQuan himself obviously knew, for Cui FeiYan was the wife of a relative. He wasn't able to rape her, and killed her instead. He thought, "Looks like he's going to kill me too. I really should attack right now, while he couldn't breathe. This way, he's bound to lose to Mai Jing." He yelled, "I would like to challenge you to a duel." Before Xie Xun could respond, his fist shot up, aimed at Xie Xun's lower abdomen. The second fist immediately followed the first one. His 'three fist' name came from his amazing power in the fist. One fist can knock down a bull. Most martial artists could last at most three fists from him. He knew at the moment that he better hurry, for once Mai Jing could no longer hold out, Xie Xun would take off his pile of mud and be able to breathe again. Anyone who can't breathe while fighting would be at a severe disadvantage.

When he attacked twice, Xie Xun could block them, but with much less power than when he had fought Chang JinPeng. Guo SanQuan yelled, "The third fist is coming!" This third fist has a name, called 'One Sweep Across Thousands of Soldiers, One Blow to Knock Down Ten Thousand Horses'. It's his best technique. He had won many fights using this move.

By this time, Mai Jing's face had turned red, with sweat pouring down his head, obviously unable to hold out much longer. Young Leader Mai, seeing his father in such a critical condition and Xie Xun fighting elsewhere, came up with an idea. He grabbed a hairpin from a lady sect member, and tried to stick it into his father's mouth. Although it might hurt his father's lips, at least the hole made by the hairpin would ensure air going in.

At this moment, a pebble came in his direction, breaking the

hairpin into two pieces. The tip flew up, Young Leader Mai let out a loud scream, clutched his right eye, only to see blood coming down from his right eye, pierced by the hairpin tip.

Mai Jing raised his hands to wipe the mud off, but Xie Xun threw out two more pebbles, breaking the joints on his shoulders, preventing his arms to move.

At this exact moment, Guo SanQuan's third fist came directly at Xie Xun's lower abdomen. He thought Xie Xun would obviously try to evade, but for some reason Xie Xun did not move at all. The punch landed perfectly. But upon impact, Guo SanQuan realized that something was wrong, for that part of the body should've been very soft, while his fist felt like it hit a stone wall. But it was too late, as the impact reverberated back into his body, and he fell back, dead.

Xie Xun turned around, only to see Mai Jing now lay on the ground dead. He first wiped away the mud on Mai Jing's face, checked his breath, then wiped the mud off his own face. He faced the sky and yelled, "These two people had been terrorizing society for too long now. Considering that they were able to live till today, the punishment came too late." Then he quickly turned towards the two Kun Lun swordsmen, first at Gao ZeCheng, then at Jiang Tao, but did not speak for a long time.

Gao and Jiang's faces turned white, put their hands on their swords, stared back at Xie Xun. Zhang CuiShan knew that they are Xie Xun's next targets, stood up, and said, "Elder Xie, the people you had killed all deserved to die. But if you kill without justification, then what makes you so different from them?"

Xie Xun smirked, said, "What's the difference? My kung fu is excellent, their's are mediocre. The strong prevails over the

weak. That is the difference.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The difference between humans and animals is that we can tell the difference between right and wrong. If the strong always oppress the weak, then how are we different from animals?”

Xie Xun laughed out loud, said, “Do you think humans really knows right from wrong? Today, our Emperor is Mongolian. He can kill as many Hans as he wished. Are you going to discuss right and wrong with him? If the Mongolians want Han people’s children and property, they simply take them. If anyone resists, the Mongols kill him. Are you going to discuss right and wrong with them?”

Zhang CuiShan pondered for a moment, then said, “The Mongolians’ actions are no better than animals. That’s why all proud Hans detestat them, hoping that one day we shall drive them off our lands.”

Xie Xun said, “Before the Mongols came, we had Han emperors. Do you think they care about right and wrong? Yue Fei was a loyal court official, yet Sun GaoZong executed him. Qin Gui was a treacherous court official, yet he lived a prosperous life, enjoying unlimited riches.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The Southern Song’s emperor was indeed a terrible one, making use of wrong court officials, finally gave our land over to the Mongolians. His wrongdoings had terrible consequences. That’s why we must be righteous, to avoid regretful consequences.” Xie Xun said, “You’re right, the emperor was indeed terrible. However, most of the people these Mongolians killed were civilians. Tell me, what evils have these innocent civilians done to deserve such fate?” Zhang CuiShan paused.

Yin SuSu suddenly answered, “The civilians have no power to retaliate. So it’s quite normal that they’d be slaughtered.”

Zhang CuiShan said, "The reason we practice martial arts is to help those in need, defend the weak who can't protect themselves. Elder Xie's martial arts is unparalleled. If you use your skills for the good of the people, many will benefit."

Xie Xun said, "What's so good about being righteous? What's my benefit for doing righteous things?"

Zhang CuiShan paused. Since he was a child, Zhang CuiShan had been taught that one learns martial arts for righteousness. Yet he never really thought of the benefits of being righteous, only felt like it's just simply the right thing to do. After a while, he said, "Well, if you do good deeds, then you're on the side of justice. Doing good deeds will lead to good fortune. Doing bad deeds leads to bad fortune."

Xie Xun laughed wildly, said, "What a load of crap! Do you really believe that?"

Zhang CuiShan thought of Yu DaiYan. His third brother had only done righteous things in his life, yet for no reason at all, he was gravely injured. Even he himself now isn't so sure he believed these words. Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Sometimes its hard to understand the workings of Heaven. We can only try to be true to our hearts. Whether this results in good fortune or bad fortune, is not something we can control."

Xie Xun looked at him, said, "I've long heard that your teacher Zhang SanFeng's martial arts is unmatched in the world, but unfortunately never had the chance to meet him. You are one of his top disciples, yet you are so mediocre. Guess there's no reason to visit him after all."

Zhang CuiShan, fuming at these words that belittled his master, said angrily, "Do you think you're worthy to judge my

master's abilities? Your kung fu is extremely high, but still nowhere near my master's level."

Yin SuSu hurriedly pulled on the back of Zhang CuiShan's robe, telling him to bear with Xie Xun for the moment. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Life and death is not big of a deal, but I can't let down the Wu Dang name."

Oddly enough, Xie Xun did not become angry. He said calmly, "Zhang SanFeng started the Wu Dang Sect. So there must be something extraordinary about him. The philosophy of martial arts is unlimited and boundless. I wouldn't be surprised if he's much superior to myself. Perhaps one day I will visit Wu Dang just to meet him. Fifth Hero Zhang, what is your best kung fu? I'm quite interested to see."

End of Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 - Floating Northward in the Endless Sea

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan took a deep breath, and jumped high into the air. His Wu Dang's lightness kung fu absorbed the best of each other sects. At this moment of life and death, he obviously used it to its full potential. As his body rose several meters into the air, Zhang CuiShan used the advanced 'Cloud Stairs', lightly tapped the side of the mountain, and shot up several more meters. The judge's brush on his right hand swiftly began to make strokes upon the stone surface.

Yin SuSu turned pale upon hearing Xie Xun's challenge towards Zhang CuiShan, after seeing Bai GuiShou, Chang JinPeng, Yuan ChangBuo, Mai Jing, Guo SanQuan, and others all died in Xie Xun's hands. Although Zhang CuiShan has incredible kung fu skills, he's still no match for Xie Xun. She said, "Elder Xie. Now that the Dragon Saber is in your hands, and everyone recognizes your superior kung fu, what else could you possibly want?"

Xie Xun said, "There's an old saying regarding this saber. Do you know about it?" Yin SuSu said, "Yes, I've heard about it." Xie Xun said, "It's been said that anyone who holds this saber will rule the land. But what exactly is the secret that makes it so powerful?" Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie is much more knowledgeable than I am. Please enlighten us." Xie Xun said, "I don't know either, which is why I need to find a peaceful place to find out." Yin SuSu said, "Oh really? Elder Xie's intelligence is unparalleled. If you can't even figure it out, then I'm sure no one else in the world could."

Xie Xun said, "Although I am arrogant, there are still many who are superior. For example, Shaolin's Reverend Kong Wen..." He paused here for a moment, a hint of regret appearing on his face, "... Shaolin's Reverends Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, Wu Dang's Taoist Zhang SanFeng, the leaders of

E Mei and Kun Lun. All of them have unbelievable skills. Although the Qing Hai Sect lies far in the western regions, its kung fu is mysterious and exceptional. The Ming Sect's Left and Right Messengers... Awesome! Even your Heavenly Eagle Sect's Leader Yin, White-Browed Eagle King, is an exceptional talent. I doubt I could defeat him."

Yin SuSu stood up and said, "Thank you for your kind words."

Xie Xun said, "I want this saber, but so do others. Leader Yin made a mistake, for there is no one here who can match me in kung fu. He thought that Branch Leaders Bai and Chang were more than enough to handle the likes of the Sea Sand Sect or the Huge Whale Clan. But he never expected someone like me here..." Yin SuSu cut in, "It's not that Leader Yin made a mistake. Something important came up at the last moment, so he couldn't make it." Xie Xun said, "That makes more sense. Had Leader Yin been here, I would've never come. First, because I doubt I could defeat him. Second, because we used to be old friends, so it would look quite bad for me to take saber from him openly. Leader Yin had always been a calculative person. It would seriously hinder his image for this saber to fall into my hands." Yin SuSu, upon knowing that he was a friend of Leader Yin, decided to try to talk him out of challenging Zhang CuiShan, said, "It's really hard to figure out how people think, how the Heaven thinks. That's why the saying goes, 'Planning depends on man, While success depends on Heaven'. Elder Xie really is lucky that you can obtain the saber so easily. While others who might've spent countless hours calculating could not."

Xie Xun said, "After it came into existence, this saber had been in possession of countless people. Each died from owning the saber. Even though I have the saber today, what's there to guarantee that a more powerful person

wouldn't take it from me?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, thought that there's something deeper behind Xie Xun's words. Zhang CuiShan thought once again of Yu DaiYan, who was injured only because of his relationships with the Dragon Saber. While he himself is now likely to die after simply viewing this saber.

Xie Xun sighed, said, "Both of you are knowledgeable in both philosophy and martial arts, look handsome and beautiful. If I killed you, it would be like shattering two priceless porcelains, a pity really. But I have to kill you two." Yin SuSu asked, "Why?"

Xie Xun said, "If there's anyone left alive on this island, soon everyone will know that I had obtained the Dragon Saber. By then, many will come to take the saber away from me. I'm certainly not invincible. How could I be sure that the saber won't be taken away? Forget others for a moment, just White-Browed Eagle King himself might possibly defeat me, not to mention all the other capable people in the Heavenly Eagle Sect who could help him." As he spoke, he shook his head, said, "Yin TianZheng's both outer and inner power strength and ferocity are unparalleled, and has my greatest admiration. To think, back in the days..." He sighed deeply, shook his head.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "So the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect is called Yin TianZheng." He said coldly, "Are you going to kill us all to prevent any witnesses?" Xie Xun said, "That's correct." Zhang CuiShan said, "Then why do you have to point out the crimes of those people before killing them?" Xie Xun laughed, said, "This is so you people can die without regret, so you can die a little happier." Zhang CuiShan said, "Looks like you're a kind person."

Xie Xun said, "Who in this world can escape death? What's so different from dying a few years earlier and a few years later? It's a shame that you two youngsters, Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin, would die such an early death. But in the context of history, your deaths really would mean nothing. Even had Qin Gui not killed Yue Fei back then, would Yue Fei have survived till today? One person should only ask to die in a peaceful fashion. It's not easy for us martial artists to die without regrets. That's why I want to challenge everyone here to their most accomplished ability, so they can die fairly. You two are still young, so I'll give you a break. Choose any form of competition you like: weapons, fists, inner power, hidden weapons, lightness kung fu, underwater kung fu, whatever. I'll agree to anything."

Yin SuSu said, "Well, aren't you arrogant. Anything's ok?" From Xie Xun's words, she knew that there's no chance to escape. WangPan Island is isolated from everywhere else. With two Branch Leaders on hand, the Heavenly Eagle Sect would certainly not feel that reinforcements are needed. So although her words are sharp, her tone was quite uneasy.

Xie Xun thought, "Wait a minute. What if she proposes that we compete in embroidery? Or brushing hair or applying makeup? Then what do I do?" So he said, "Obviously it must be a martial arts competition. Or did you want to compete in eating and drinking? Actually, I'd probably win in those competitions too. Alas, I really don't want to kill a lovely young couple like yourselves."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu's faces both turned red upon hearing the words 'a lovely young couple'.

Yin SuSu's elegant expression turned to a frown, asked, "If you lose, will you commit suicide too?" Xie Xun said with a

smile, "How can I lose?" Yin SuSu said, "There's always a chance to lose in any competition. This Fifth Hero Zhang is a renowned disciple. He just might be better than you at something." Xie Xun said, "Even if he knows exquisite techniques, there's no way his inner power is close to mine."

While they conversed, Zhang CuiShan thought, "What should I choose to compete with him? Lightness Kung fu? My newly learnt fist form?" Suddenly he thought of something, and asked, "Elder Xie, if you force me to fight, then I shall agree to one. Should I lose, I will commit suicide immediately in front of Elder Xie. But what if we drew?"

Xie Xun said, "Then we compete in something else, until there is a winner." Zhang CuiShan said, "Fine. Should I win, I won't ask you to commit suicide, just to grant me a single request." Xie Xun said, "Agreed. Now state your rules."

Yin SuSu said with great concern, "What are you going to compete in? How sure are you of success?" Zhang CuiShan whispered, "Not sure. I can only try my best." Yin SuSu whispered, "If you lose, then lets try to escape."

Zhang CuiShan did not respond, thought, "Where can we escape now that the boats have all sunk?" He adjusted his robe and took out his Iron Judge's Brush. Xie Xun said, "I've heard that you are known as 'Iron Brush and Silver Hook Zhang CuiShan'. Where's your Silver Tiger Hook? Why not take it out."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I don't want to fight you, just compete in writing some words." As he spoke he walked over to a high mountain, with a smooth cliff. Zhang CuiShan took a deep breath, and jumped high into the air. His Wu Dang's lightness kung fu absorbed the best of each other sects. At this moment of life and death, he obviously used it to its full potential. As his body rose several meters into the air, Zhang

CuiShan used the advanced 'Cloud Stairs', lightly tapped the side of the mountain, and shot up several more meters. The judge's brush on his right hand swiftly began to make strokes upon the stone surface. Quickly, the word 'martial' appeared. After he finished, he began to drop down.

At this moment his left hand took out his silver hook, which quickly held on to the side of the cliff, allowing him to regain his balance. Then his right hand wrote out the word 'world'. Each word contained all of Zhang SanFeng's original ideas from that night, encompassing both hard and soft techniques. The words demonstrated some of the deepest martial arts philosophies of the Wu Dang style. Although the words aren't deeply etched due to Zhang CuiShan's shallow inner power, the speed and detail in which he wrote them are incredible.

When finished, Zhang CuiShan followed it with the word 'most', and 'venerable'. He began to write faster and faster, only to see dusts falling down the cliff, until twenty-four characters were etched onto cliff. This engraving really seemed like Li Bai's poem: "[Seriously, you don't REALLY think I can translate a non-butchered version of a poem by the most famous poet in China, do you? Now pretend that you've just read something very beautiful, very poetic, and very applicable to this situation. Use your imagination, folks! ^_^]"

When Zhang CuiShan finished writing the last character, 'compete', he pushed off on the cliffs with both the brush and the hook. With a flip in midair, landed by Yin SuSu's side.

Xie Xun kept on staring at the words, after a long, long moment of silence, he finally sighed, said, "I can't write that. I lost."

For you see, the way these twenty-four words were written involved ideas that only Zhang SanFeng thought up of. Each stroke contains a powerful technique. Even Zhang SanFeng himself, before the night he invented these techniques, would be hard pressed to duplicate Zhang CuiShan's work. Xie Xun obviously did not know the details regarding the origins of Zhang CuiShan's writing. He only thought that Zhang CuiShan wrote these exact words out of inspiration, upon seeing the Dragon Saber. Had Zhang CuiShan been forced to write any other words, he would not be able to create such a great piece of composition.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands loudly, yelled, "You lost, can't go back on your promise."

Xie Xun looked at Zhang CuiShan, said, "Fifth Hero Zhang's calligraphy really is one of a kind. I've never thought I'd see anything like this. You have my admiration. What do you demand?" Because of his promise, Xie Xun had to say this, but he obviously did not wish to in his heart.

Zhang CuiShan said, "When it comes to knowledge, I'm far inferior to Elder Xie. It would be hard for me to 'demand' something. But I do have a single request." Xie Xun said, "What is that?" Zhang CuiShan said, "You may take the Dragon Saber off the island, but leave everyone here alive. You may have everyone here swear that they do not reveal your secret."

Xie Xun said, "Do you think I'm that stupid? That I'd believe their stupid promises?" Yin SuSu said, "Since you lost, you have to do what he says. Or are you going back on your promise."

Xie Xun said, "So what if I don't deliver on my promise? What are you going to do?" But after thinking a while, he felt his

words sounded very unreasonable. So he said, "I'll spare you two's lives, but not the others." Zhang CuiShan said, "The swordsmen from Kun Lun are disciples of a righteous sect. You really should..." Xie Xun shook his head, said, "Who cares? Doesn't matter who they are. Hurry up and tear off two pieces of cloth from your clothing. Stuff them into your ears. Then cover your ears with your hands. If you value your life, do as I say now." He spoke the last few sentences in a whisper, as if afraid someone might hear him.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, not knowing what he planned on doing. But considering Xie Xun's serious tone, they both did as directed.

Suddenly they saw Xie Xun opened his mouth, as if yelling loud. Neither could hear what he's yelling, but they could feel the ground vibrate, only to see everyone else with their mouth open, as if screaming in pain. Their faces then turned pale, almost in torture. After a while, one behind another, they fell to the ground.

Gao and Jiang immediately went into a meditative position when they heard Xie Xun, trying to fight off the noise with inner power. Sweat came pouring down their heads quickly afterwards. Several times they tried to cover their ears, but failed each time. Until finally, they suddenly jumped up into the air, fell down, and stopped moving.

Xie Xun closed his mouth, made a gesture, so Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu took out the cloth in their ears. Xie Xun said, "These people are now all unconscious from my scream, but their lives won't be in danger. When they wake up, they'll become retarded and forget everything in their past. This way, they won't divulge my secret. Fifth Hero Zhang, I've granted you your request. I did not kill any of them."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Although you did not take their lives, their situation is possibly worse than death." He absolutely despised the cruel manner in which Xie Xun did things. Looking at the people on the ground, he shuddered at the thought of what would happen to him should he had heard that roar.

Xie Xun's face remained expressionless, said, "Let's go!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Where to?" Xie Xun said, "Back home, of course! What else is there to do here?" Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, both thought, "Looks like we'll have to be with this demon for another day. What else might happen during this time?"

Xie Xun led them over a mountain in the back of the island, until they saw a boat docked by the beach. Xie Xun walked to the boat, bowed, and said, "Please step up onto the boat." Yin SuSu smirked, said, "Well, since when did you turn into a gentleman?" Xie Xun said, "By coming onto my boat, you are my honored guests. Of course I should be courteous to you."

After getting on the boat, Xie Xun made a hand gesture, ordering the sailors to leave shore.

There are sixteen sailors, yet they all used hand gestures with each other, as if they're all mute. Yin SuSu said, "You are certainly something, to be able to find so many mute-deaf sailors."

Xie Xun said, "What's so hard about that? First I find some illiterate sailors. Then I shatter their hearing with a roar. Then feed them some drugs to make them mute."

Zhang CuiShan shuddered inside. Yin SuSu clapped her hands, and said with a smile, "That's a great idea. Since they're deaf-mute, they certainly could not divulge your

secrets. Too bad you need them to sail, or you'd probably blind them too, I bet." Zhang CuiShan looked at her, said in a lecturing tone, "Miss Yin. Why do a girl like you only think of ways to hurt people? This is a sad story. How could you laugh at it?" Yin SuSu stuck out her tongue at him, about to argue, but thought better of it upon seeing his expression. Xie Xun said calmly, "After I get back to the mainland, of course I'll blind them." Zhang CuiShan looked at the sailors, thought, "In a day you'll all be blind too."

The masts raised, the ship began to move. Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie. Are you just going to leave these people here? How are they going to get back?" Xie Xun said, "Mr. Zhang. You are a pretty good guy. The only problem is that you're too mindful of other people's businesses. What's wrong with leaving these people here on their own?" Zhang CuiShan realized that it's impossible to talk any sense into this man, and decided to stop talking altogether. He thought, "Although most people on the island aren't good people, it's still a terrible fate that they've suffered. The elders of Kun Lun sect would surely look for their disciples now that they're going to die here. Unfortunately, yet more troubles in the martial world."

For the past years, the seven Wudang heroes had always gotten the upper hand in any confrontation they've faced. Who'd have thought that he, Zhang CuiShan, would be a prisoner here on this boat? Angry and dejected, he decided to calm down and meditate, ignoring Yin SuSu and Xie Xun.

After a while, he looked out the window into the sea, staring at golden the sun setting in the distance, a beautiful scene. Suddenly, he trembled, thought, "Wait, why is the sun setting to the back of the boat?" He turned around and asked Xie Xun, "The sailors are sailing in the wrong direction. We're going east." Xie Xun said, "I know. We're supposed to go

east.”

Yin SuSu said in shock, “But there is only water to the east. Where are we going?”

Xie Xun said, “Haven’t I been clear enough? After getting this saber, I want to seek a place to rest, to find the secret of the Dragon Saber, to know why it can rule over the martial world. In the central plains, there’s no way I can hide for very long before someone find out about my secret. Then I’d have to spend a ton of effort just fighting off those seeking the Dragon Saber. Besides, should those enemies be the likes of White-Browed Eagle King or Zhang SanFeng, I might lose the saber too. No... it’s much better to rest in a faraway island, where I can settle down.”

Yin SuSu said, “But you have to take us back first.” Xie Xun said with a smile, “Wouldn’t my secret be divulged upon your return?” Zhang CuiShan stood up and said loudly, “Then what do you want?” Xie Xun said, “Simple. I just want you two to live on the island with me.” Zhang CuiShan said, “What if you can’t even figure out the secret after eighteen years? Xie Xun said, “Then you’ll live with me for eighteen years. If I never figure it out, then you’ll live with me forever. You too are a perfect match for each other. How about becoming husband and wife on the island, and have kids? Heheh, now wouldn’t that be nice?” Zhang CuiShan yelled angrily, “Don’t you dare say that sort of thing!” He looked around, only to see Yin SuSu’s head lowered, her face incredibly red.

Zhang CuiShan shuddered, realized that if he spent any more time with Yin SuSu, he might not be able to control his emotions. Xie Xun’s a powerful opponent, his heart is yet another one. It really is best for him to leave this place as soon as possible. Suppressing his anger, Zhang CuiShan said,

“Elder Xie, you should know about my reputation. I am willing to make a solemn promise, that I will not divulge anything I saw and heard today.”

Xie Xun said, “I’ve heard of your reputation, that your words can be trusted. But I made a promise when I was twenty-eight. Look at my finger.” As he spoke he raised his left hand. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both saw that his pinky on the left hand has been cut off.

Xie Xun said, “That year, the person I respected, loved the most ruined me. He killed my whole family, my parents, wife, and kid. From that moment on, I promised to never trust a single person again. Today I am now forty-one. For the past thirteen years I’ve only been friends with wild animals. I trust animals, but not people. In these years I’ve killed more humans than animals.”

Zhang CuiShan shuddered, realized just why has no one heard of him despite his amazing kung fu. That event when he was twenty-eight must’ve devastated him. That’s why he has turned his hatred upon society. Zhang CuiShan originally only despised Xie Xun, but now he couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. After a while, he said, “Elder Xie. I take it you’ve already had your revenge.”

Xie Xun said, “No. The person who ruined me is superior at kung fu. I can’t beat him.” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped, said, “Better than you? Who is this person?” Xie Xun said, “Why should I speak of him? It only brings back painful memories. If it weren’t for revenge, why do I need to take this saber? To find out its secret? Mr. Zhang, I really like you. Otherwise, I would’ve never let you two lived in my usual temper. It’s certainly quite abnormal for me let you live a while longer. Hopefully it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Yin SuSu said, "What do you mean by 'a while longer'?" Xie Xun said, "When I understand the secrets within this saber and leave the island, that's the day I shall kill you. So the longer it takes for me to find the secret, the longer you two shall live." Yin SuSu let out a 'humph', said, "Actually, this saber is just a bit sharper than other weapons, and can withstand lots of heat. What secret could it possibly contain? I bet 'Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow' simply meant that it can break all other weapons into pieces."

Xie Xun sighed, said, "If what you're saying is true, then the three of us will live on the island forever." Suddenly his expression turned pale, as if he felt this just might be the case. Then he would have no chance at revenge.

Zhang CuiShan wanted to say some word to lessen his worry. Only to see Xie Xun blow out the candle, said, "Let's go to sleep." Followed by a long, deep sigh, which contained infinite pain, infinite despair, almost inhuman, as if wild beast sighing before its death.

The cold wind came into the cabin again and again. Yin SuSu did not wear much. After a while, she began to quiver. Zhang CuiShan whispered to her, "Miss Yin, are you cold?" Yin SuSu said, "I'm fine." Zhang CuiShan took off his robe and said, "Put this on." Yin SuSu was very grateful, said, "You don't have to. You're cold too." Zhang CuiShan said, "I'm not afraid of the cold." As he spoke he put the robe on Yin SuSu's hand. Yin SuSu took it and put it over her shoulder, still feeling the warmth of Zhang CuiShan's body on the robe. She felt very content in her heart, and couldn't help but smile brightly in the darkness.

Zhang CuiShan, on the other hand, was only thinking of ways to escape. After a long time, he felt that there's only one way

out, "We must kill Xie Xun to escape."

He listened closely at his surrounding, only to hear heavy breathing from Xie Xun mixed with the sounds of the ocean. He thought, "He had made a promise to not trust another person. So why can he sleep so soundly in the same room as us? Does he have a special sixth sense that guards him from sneak attacks? Either way, I must attack now. Otherwise, I'd have to waste my entire life on an island with him." He quietly moved towards Yin SuSu, so he could whisper in her ear. But Yin SuSu unexpectedly turned toward him at this exact moment. As a result, Zhang CuiShan's lips fell right on top of Yin SuSu's.

Zhang CuiShan was shocked, about to explain his rudeness, but didn't know where to start. Yin SuSu happily put her head on his shoulders, at the moment she only felt infinite warmth and kindness in her heart. Her only wish was for this boat to remain sailing on forever, as she would gladly remain in this exact moment for the next hundred years. Suddenly she heard Zhang CuiShan whisper by her ear, "I'm very sorry, Miss Yin." Yin SuSu's face had long been bright red, as if a big, red flower had grown on her face. She whispered back at him, "I'm very happy that you really like me." Although she's always been brash, and kills people without hesitation, Yin SuSu is still like any other girl when it comes to her first romance. Surprise, happiness, and confusion all mixed into her heart. If it weren't for the darkness, there was no way she would've said those words.

Zhang CuiShan was incredibly surprised. He never thought his apology would make her divulge her true feelings. Yin SuSu's dazzling beauty is rarely seen, and from the very beginning has had feelings for him. These eight words further showed exactly where her heart lies. Even though Zhang CuiShan is upright and straightforward, and never thought

about romance, his heart has nonetheless been moved at this moment. Only to feel her soft body resting on his shoulders, a faint fragrance entered his nose. He wanted to say something romantic towards Yin SuSu, but then suddenly remembered, "Zhang CuiShan. In a dangerous situation like this, how could you be so undisciplined? Have you forgot all about your master's teachings? Even if you love her, and she loves you, she's still born of an evil sect, and has done terrible things in her life. At least you should wait till you've met the master, and have him officially arrange a marriage for you. How can you do this sort of indecent deed in a dark room like this?" When Zhang CuiShan thought of this, he immediately straightened up, then whispered into Yin SuSu's ear, "We need to find a way to get this person under control, so we can escape."

Yin SuSu was originally in a daze, but quickly returned to reality, asked, "How?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "If we attack him in his sleep, it would be very dishonorable. In a moment, I'll wake him up and match palms with him. You can immediately release your silver needles from the side. Although it's not right to fight two-on-one, he's too powerful for either one of us. This is our only chance."

These words were spoken very softly. Plus, Zhang CuiShan had his mouth stuck tightly on Yin SuSu's ears when he spoke. Yet before Yin SuSu could respond, Xie Xun started to laugh, said, "If you had snuck up on me, even though it wouldn't have been successful, at least you had a tiny chance. Yet you just had to maintain your righteous image, and fight me openly. Well, you asked for it." When he finished his sentence, Xie Xun's body dashed towards Zhang CuiShan, his palm aimed at Zhang CuiShan's chest.

Zhang CuiShan had been gathering chi at the moment Xie Xun started to speak. By the time Xie Xun attacked, Zhang CuiShan matched his palm, using Wudang's 'Soft Palms' in return. As the palms touched, Zhang CuiShan felt his opponents' force came crushing down upon him like a mountain. Zhang CuiShan knew his opponents inner power is far superior to his own, and has long decided to concentrate only on defending.

Xie Xun's force came in three waves, only to feel that Zhang CuiShan's power is much weaker, but never declining, never exhausted. No matter how powerful his palm strike is, Zhang CuiShan somehow managed to block it. Xie Xun raised his left hand and attacked Zhang CuiShan's forehead. Zhang CuiShan blocked it with the technique 'Golden Support Beam'. Wudang's strength lies in its minuteness, vastly different from other sects'. So despite their huge difference in ability, Xie Xun could not finish off Zhang CuiShan in a short period of time.

Sweat poured down Zhang CuiShan's face, his strength nearly gone, thought, "Why haven't Miss Yin used her silver needles yet? Xie Xun is just concentrating on me right now. If she attacks him, then he'll have to release his palm to block the needles, at which time I could wound him with my palm.

Of course, Xie Xun thought of all this too. He originally planned to take out Zhang CuiShan with one swift blow. Unfortunately, he underestimated his opponent, for Zhang CuiShan's inner is much better than he imagined. As the two matched palms, both studied Yin SuSu's movements. Zhang CuiShan could not break off concentration to speak, but Xie Xun had no such problems, said, "Little girl. I suggest you don't try anything brash. For if I changed my palm into a fist, I can easily break all the bones in his body."

Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, I'll simply promise that we shall follow your orders. Please let go of him." Xie Xun said, "Mr. Zhang, what do you think?" Zhang CuiShan couldn't speak, but he thought angrily, "Come on, release your silver needles. How could you not take advantage of an opportunity like this?" Yin SuSu said hastily, "Please release your palms, Elder Xie. If you hurt him, I'll fight you till my last breath." Actually, Xie Xun is quite afraid of Yin SuSu's needles. This cabin is quite small. The needles are tiny and move without sound. He really would have much trouble blocking them. He could kill Zhang CuiShan immediately, but doesn't really want to, thought, "This little girl must be afraid of me, which is why she hasn't made a move yet. If this continues, the result would be bad for everyone." So he said, "Then you make a promise on his behalf." Yin SuSu paused for a moment, then said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, I know we're no match for Elder Xie. Let's just follow him to his island for a year or two. With his intelligence, he's bound to figure out the Dragon Saber's secrets by then. I'll make the promise for you!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "What stupid promise? Hurry up and fire the needles!" He hated the fact that he couldn't talk, nor make any gestures in the darkness. Besides, with his hands tied, Zhang CuiShan couldn't make any hand signals anyway.

Yin SuSu did not hear any response from Zhang CuiShan, so she said, "I, Yin SuSu, and Zhang CuiShan will remain with Elder Xie on his deserted island, until he finds the secrets to the Dragon Saber. Should we break the promise, we shall die under a saber or sword."

Xie Xun said with a smile, "What's so special about dying under a sword or saber for people like us?"

Yin SuSu gritted her teeth, said, "Fine, then let me die before the age of twenty!" Xie Xun let out a hearty laugh, and retracted his palms.

Yin SuSu quickly lit up a nearby candle, only to see Zhang CuiShan's face looking like gold paper, his breathing very subtle. She hastily grabbed a handkerchief from her pocket and began to wipe away the sweat off of Zhang CuiShan's face.

Xie Xun said with a smile, "Wow. Wu Dang disciples really are worthy of their fame."

Zhang CuiShan had been annoyed at Yin SuSu for not firing her needles, but as he saw her teary, worrisome face, Zhang CuiShan began to appreciate her genuine concern. He took a deep breath, about to say something to her, when suddenly he blacked out, only to seemingly hear Yin SuSu yelled, "Xie Xun, you've tired Fifth Brother Zhang to death. I'll kill you." But Xie Xun simply laughed her off.

Suddenly, Zhang CuiShan's body fell to the side, rolling on the ground for a moment, while hearing Xie Xun and Yin SuSu both scream at the same time. Amidst their screams, the massive wind howled, and huge waves began to bombard the boat continuously.

Zhang CuiShan's whole body shivered, his mouth drank a large amount of salt water. Originally semi-conscious, he's now fully awake. His first thought was, "Has the boat sunk?" He doesn't know how to swim, and immediately try to stand up. The deck below his feet suddenly tilted to the left, and a batch of seawater poured out the boat. Hearing the huge wind howling, Zhang CuiShan felt his whole body drenched with water. Before he realized exactly what had happened, Xie Xun yelled, "Zhang CuiShan, hurry to the back of the

boat and grab the helm!" This yell sounded like thunder. Even while in a this huge storm, his voice still carried a strange splendor. Zhang CuiShan did not think too deeply, immediately went to the back of the boat, only to see a black shadow flash before his eyes, as a sailor got washed off the boat, and into the sea.

Before Zhang CuiShan made it to the helm, another tidal wave struck, this one hit like a brick wall, severely shaking the boat. By this time Zhang CuiShan had gathered up all his ability, his two feet fixed tightly to the boat's surface, as if they were nailed to it. When the wave passed, he quickly darted towards the helm, holding the steering wheel.

Only to hear ka-cha-cha, ka-cha-cha sounds in the distance, as Xie Xun waved his mace, tearing down the front and the middle masts.

But even with just one mast in the rear, the boat still danced wildly in the sea. Xie Xun wants to roll up the back mast, but couldn't in this weather, as part of it has sunk into the water. Xie Xun yelled angrily, "Damnable Heaven, stupid wind!" Seeing the boat about to tip over, Xie Xun was forced to cut off the rear mast too.

Without the masts, the boat can no longer change directions, and can only travel to where the wind takes them.

Zhang CuiShan yelled loudly, "Miss Yin, where are you?" He yelled several times, without hearing any response. After a while, his yells contained crying. When suddenly, a hand held on to his knees.

By the time another wave had passed, that hand had grabbed his neck. A voice said, "Fifth Brother Zhang. Do you really care for me this much?" Indeed the voice of Yin SuSu.

Zhang CuiShan, joyous at her appearance, grabbed the helm with his right hand, Yin SuSu's body tightly with his left, said, "Thank goodness!" He thought happily, "Oh, she's still here. She didn't fall into the sea." At this moment when each wave could easily wash them into the sea, Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized that his concern for Yin SuSu outweighed even his own life.

Yin SuSu said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, let us die together." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes! SuSu, let us die together."

Under normal circumstances, there would be many apprehensions regarding them being together, like the fact that one's good and one's evil. So even if they were in love, it would not be nearly as close as they are right now. At this moment, in this dark, tumultuous environment, where each moment maybe their last, there is only unspeakable serenity in each person's heart. Despite the fatigue Zhang CuiShan suffered in his duel against Xie Xun, he has never felt more energetic now due to Yin SuSu's affection, and therefore could hold on to the helm tightly.

All the mute-deaf sailors had now been washed into the sea. Only Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan's powerful martial arts kept them from having the same fate. Thankfully, the boat is incredibly sturdy, and kept together despite getting hit wave after wave.

In this type of weather, no one knows just which direction they're headed. Even if they did, it wouldn't have mattered, for they could not control the ship anyway.

Xie Xun walked to the rear of the ship, said, "Brother Zhang, that was great, now let me take over the helm. You two should go rest inside the ship.

Zhang CuiShan stood up, and was about to go into the cabin with Yin SuSu, when another wave hit. This one came very unexpectedly, and threw Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu overboard.

With the sea right below them, Zhang CuiShan instinctively grabbed Yin SuSu's wrist with his left hand. His only thought was, "To die with her under the sea, never to part again." Just as he grabbed Yin SuSu, a rope tied around his right hand, only to feel his whole body being pulled backward. For Xie Xun had noticed what had happened, and saved them by throwing out a rope. With two loud thuds, the two people landed back on the boat again. This escape from death was certainly quite unexpected. Even Xie Xun thought they were quite lucky. If he hadn't had a rope by him, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu would've been dead by now.

Zhang CuiShan carried Yin SuSu into the cabin, while the ship still floated among the huge waves, their fate yet very much unknown. But after going through that near-fatal situation, both people had stopped caring about life and death. Inside Zhang CuiShan's embrace, Yin SuSu said into Zhang CuiShan's ears, "Fifth Brother Zhang, should we live through this, I'll be with you forever." Zhang CuiShan's heart jumped, said, "I wanted to say the same thing. Whether in Heaven or Hell, on Earth or under the sea, we'll always be together." Two hearts as one, they actually began to appreciate this storm that brought them together.

In Xie Xun's mind, though, there's only extreme anger and complaint. No matter how strong his martial arts ability, he's still at the mercy of the wind and water. Only the Heavens can determine fate.

After about six hours of perpetual storm, the sky finally cleared, revealing bright stars above.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the rear end of the boat, said, "Elder Xie, thank you for saving our lives." Xie Xun said coldly, "Don't thank me just yet. Our lives are still at the mercy of this Damnable Heaven." Zhang CuiShan has never heard anyone put the word 'damnable' in front of 'Heaven'. He thought a person must be incredibly angry at the world to think such a thing. He then pondered, it looks as if they're going to float on this boundless sea forever, without really any chance of returning home. For this to happen just at the moment he and Yin SuSu fell in love, is like to have just tasted the finest wine in the world, only to have it snatched away. Hearing Xie Xun's use of 'Damnable Heaven', he finally could understand just what the phrase 'fate toys with humans'(common Chinese proverb) means.

Zhang CuiShan sighed, and then took over the helm. Xie Xun went to take a rest after working hard all night.

Yin SuSu sat by Zhang CuiShan's side, and looked at the stars in the night sky above. She found the North Star, and saw that the water is carrying them in that direction. She said, "Fifth brother, this boat is continuously moving north." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes! Hopefully it will go west too, so we can return to the mainland."

Yin SuSu was spellbound at the scenery for a while, before saying, "I wonder where we'll end up if this boat continues east." Zhang CuiShan said, "There's only water to the East. We don't have any water, so we can only last seven to eight days..." Yin SuSu, who had just experienced love, still felt like living in a dream, and didn't want to think about the negatives. She said, "I heard that there's a celestial mountain in the Eastern Sea. Immortal beings live on that mountain. Perhaps we'll sail to that mountain, meet gods and goddesses..." Then she pointed to the Silver River*, said,

“Perhaps we’ll sail right into the Silver River. When we get there, we’ll see the Cow Herder and the Lady Weaver meeting on the Magpie Bridge**.”

*Note: Chinese term for the Milky Way.

**Note: For those who don’t know, ‘The Legend of the Cow Herder and the Lady Weaver’(pinyin: Nuo2 Lang2 Zhi1 Nu3) is a very popular romantic folk tale. Here’s what I know about it, although I’m not sure how detailed or accurate I am:

**(Note, cont...) The Chinese Mythology is similar to Greek mythology, in that the gods live in a world of their own. In Chinese myth, the gods’ world is simply Heaven. An Emperor and an Empress rule the Heaven. They had seven daughters. One of them is the Lady Weaver (the star constellation Vega in the sky, or Lady Weaver star constellation for the Chinese). Lady Weaver one day decided to sneak down to the world of the mortals(aka Earth). She then fell in love with a cow herder. They got married and had two children together. However, the Empress found out about their relationship, and needless to say got really pissed. She went down to Earth to take back her insolent daughter. On their way back to Heaven, the cow herder chased after them, carrying their two children in two buckets, which he carried using a pole on his shoulder (The Cow Herder star constellation, not sure of its English name, is aptly three stars, a bright one in the middle, with two dimmer stars to its sides). To stop him from chasing, the Empress took out her hairpin, and made a cut through the sky, creating the Silver River(Milky Way). The cow herder could not get across the river, and could not therefore see Lady Weaver again.

**(Note, cont...) However, their tale deeply moved the magpies(magpies are a type of bird, which are suppose to be the bearer of good news in ancient Chinese superstitions). So

on the seventh day of the seventh month of each year, thousands of magpies would fly above the Silver River and make a bridge filled with birds. This way, the cow herder and Lady Weaver could meet on the bridge.

Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "We can give the boat to the Cow Herder, so if he wants to meet Lady Weaver, he can just take the boat over, instead of having to wait till the seventh day of the seventh month for the magpies." Yin SuSu said, "If we give the boat to the Cow Herder, then how are we going to meet?" Zhang CuiShan said, "In Heaven or Hell, on Earth or under the sea, we'll always be together. Since we're going to be together, then why would we need to cross the Silver River?" Yin SuSu smiled brightly, as if a flower bloomed on her face. She held Zhang CuiShan's hands, gently caressing it.

The two has thousands of romantic words to say to each other, but don't have to really say any at all. After a long, long time, Zhang CuiShan lowered his head, only to see tears flowing down Yin SuSu's eyes. He said in shock, "Why are you so sad?" Yin SuSu said softly, "On Earth, under water, I might be able to stay with you. But when we die, you will go to Heaven, and I... I... will go to Hell." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, that won't happen."

Yin SuSu sighed, said, "I know I've done too many evil things in this life. I've killed so many people that I've lost count." Zhang CuiShan shuddered, and realized that her vicious ways really makes her a flawed match for him. But because he's too in love with her, and they're most likely going to die soon in the middle of the sea, he did not think too much about it. He tried to calm her, "As long as you can correct your ways, everything will turn out fine." Yin SuSu did not say anything. After a while, she began to sing.

She sang with the tune of the 'The Hillside Sheep'.

"He and I, I and he, so worried about each other. Enemies, how could we become fated to love, by dying in front of the gates of Hell, letting the devil torture, getting beat by a mallet, boiled in a frying pan, ouch! [followed by some other words of torture, too lazy to translate...]"

Suddenly they heard Xie Xun yell in the cabin, "Great song. Miss Yin, that's much more to my liking than this fake gentleman here."

Yin SuSu said, "You and I are both evil people. Fate will certainly bring us misfortune."

Zhang CuiShan whispered, "If you ever have a misfortune, then I'll have the misfortune with you."

Yin SuSu yelled happily, "Fifth brother!" so happy could not add another word.

The next morning had clear skies, and Xie Xun used his mace to catch some fish. After starving for a couple of days, the three people didn't really care that the fishes were raw. There is no fresh water on the boat, so they drank fish blood for water.

The sea continued to carry them northward, facing the North Star each night. The Sun continued to rise on the right, and set on the east. Their directions did not change for over ten days.

The temperature became colder and colder. Due to their high inner powers, Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan had no problems coping, but Yin SuSu's health began to deteriorate. Xie and Zhang both took off clothes for her to wear, but that still

didn't help. Seeing her faint smiles, trying to fight off the cold, Zhang CuiShan felt unspeakable pain in his heart. He thought that if they continued north, Yin SuSu would certainly die from the cold.

However, their luck finally came when the boat met a school of seals. Xie Xun killed several seals with his mace, and they then covered themselves in sealskin, so thick they felt like putting on a coat. They also ate the seal meat.

That night, Yin SuSu asked with a smile, "What's the best wild animal in the world?" The three of them answered together, "Seals!" At that moment, they heard a sound from the front of the boat, only to see a large chunk of ice hitting the side of the boat.

Their moods turned sullen upon seeing this. As they travel further and further north, the temperature would get colder and colder. Until the boat would likely freeze, which would be the day they die.

The next morning, they found chunks of ice. Xie Xun smiled bitterly, said, "I can't believe this. I tried to find the secrets to the Dragon Saber, and ended up turning into an iceman. What a joke."

He picked up the Dragon Saber, and said angrily, "To Hell with this saber!" He then tried to throw it away, but stopped at the last moment, sighed, and put the saber back into the cabin.

After four more days, the surface of the sea is now mostly covered with thick pieces of ice. The three of them decided to ignore their condition. But that night, they heard a thunderous noise, trembling the entire boat.

Xie Xun yelled, "Awesome! It's a big iceberg!"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu smiled bitterly, but still held on to each other tightly, only to feel cold water up to their legs, as the boat began to sink. They heard Xie Xun yell, "Jump up to the iceberg. Even living an extra day or so would be good. Humph, the Damnable Heaven wants me to die now, but I won't let him get his wish."

Zhang and Yin went to the head of the boat, only to see the moon's silver rays reflected off the iceberg, a very beautiful, but also terrifying, sight. Xie Xun is already sitting on the side of the iceberg, reached out with his mace, so Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan both could use it to get onto the iceberg.

The boat disappeared after a while.

Xie Xun put two sealskins on the ground, so they can sit on top of them. This iceberg looks like a small hill, about sixty meters long, thirty meters across, much more spacey than the boat. Xie Xun looked around, said, "This is actually not a bad place. I can stretch a bit here." As he spoke he got up and walked around. Although the iceberg is very slippery, Xie Xun's steps are as secure as they would be on normal ground.

The iceberg floated with the water, yet still towards the north. Xie Xun said with a smile, "Looks like this Damnable Heaven sent us a boat, so we can go to the North Pole to meet the North Pole's immortal old man." With the man she loves by her side, Yin SuSu seemed to be satisfied completely. Even had the sky fallen, she would still not have cared. Of the three people, only Zhang CuiShan worried about their situation.

The iceberg floated for another seven days. In the daytime,

the sunlight created a blinding light upon reflected off the iceberg, so they had trouble seeing. The three then decided to simply sleep during the day. Then they would catch fish and other animals at night. Oddly enough, the days became longer and longer as they sailed further north, until daytime lasted twenty-two hours. The night seemed to pass in an instant.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu's health became worse and worse, but Xie Xun seemed to be quite well. Each day, he would point to the sky and curse continuously at Heaven.

One day, while Zhang CuiShan's sleeping, he suddenly heard Yin SuSu screaming in his dream, "Let go of me, let go of me." Zhang CuiShan immediately woke up, only to see Xie Xun holding Yin SuSu's shoulders, his expression that of a wild animal. Zhang CuiShan had been worrying about Xie Xun's expressions lately, but never thought he'd try to hurt Yin SuSu. He said in a hurry, "Let go of her!"

Xie Xun said threateningly, "You bastard. You killed my wife. Fine, I'll kill your wife today, leaving you to live alone in this world." As he spoke his left hand began to choke Yin SuSu's throat. Yin SuSu let out an 'Ah' in response.

Zhang CuiShan said in shock, "I'm not your enemy. I didn't kill your wife. Elder Xie, please regain consciousness. I am Zhang CuiShan, not your enemy."

Xie Xun froze for a moment, yelled, "Who is this? Is she your wife?" Zhang CuiShan, seeing Xie Xun choking Yin SuSu, hastily said, "She's Miss Yin, Elder Xie. Not your enemy's wife."

Xie Xun yelled madly, "Who cares? My wife was killed, my mother was killed, I'm going to kill all the women in the

world!" As he spoke, his grip tightened, so Yin SuSu couldn't even let out a sound.

Zhang CuiShan realized that Xie Xun was mad, and couldn't be reasoned with. So he quickly gathered his energy, and shot out his palm towards Xie Xun's back. Xie Xun met the palm with his own. With the slippery surface, Zhang CuiShan fell onto the ground. Xie Xun's right foot came up, about to kick him on the waist. Zhang CuiShan quickly tapped the ground with his hand, and sprung his body back up. Xie Xun then took back his foot, and instead, his right palm came at Zhang CuiShan's forehead.

Yin SuSu turned around, and attacked with her left hand, aimed at Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun ignored her and concentrated on Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan matched his palm, only to find himself unable to gather up much chi from his body. As Yin SuSu hit Xie Xun on the forehead, she felt something very hard hitting her hand, and retracted her palm in pain. Xie Xun turned to look at her, his eyes bright red, as if there's fire burning within them. He tightened his grasp even more.

Just at this moment, light shined from the north side, many different strands of light, very suddenly in the darkness. First came purple lights, each strand darker and longer than the previous. Within the purple light carried golden light, blue light, green light, and red light. Xie Xun, in his surprise, gasped, and put down Yin SuSu. Zhang CuiShan felt that the force coming from Xie Xun gradually dissipated.

Xie Xun, with his hand behind his back, walked towards the light, and simply stared at it. Of course, the light they're seeing right now is the aurora borealis. But no one in China at that time had seen it.

CuiShan held Yin SuSu closely, their hearts beating rapidly.

Xie Xun, for the rest of the night, did not move, simply stared at the light. When daytime came, he regained his consciousness, and started to converse normally.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both thought, "No wonder he's so sad. His parents and wife were all killed. Wonder who the killer was?" Afraid that Xie Xun might go crazy again, they did not broach the subject with him.

Many days passed by, when Xie Xun started to act abnormally again with his curses, and his eyes turned red. Although they never talked about it, both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu were careful to guard against another attack.

One day, when the sun did not set at its usual time, Xie Xun yelled, "Damn it! Even the sun is trying to piss me off now. If I had a bow and arrow, I'd shoot you down this instant!" Suddenly he grabbed a piece of ice and threw it towards the sun. After traveling about sixty meters, the ice dropped into the water. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu thought, "Wow, what arm strength. I probably can't even throw half as far."

Xie Xun threw one piece of ice after another, until he threw about seventy pieces. He found that no matter how many he threw, the sun still remained too far for him to hit.

Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, perhaps you should rest a while. Ignore the sun."

Xie Xun looked back at her, staring into her eyes. Yin SuSu was terrified, but forced a smile. Xie Xun suddenly screamed, jumped up and quickly grabbed her, yelling, "Choke you to death! Choke you to death! Why did you kill my mother, why kill my son?" Yin SuSu felt like an iron hoop gagged around

her neck, and this hoop became tighter and tighter.

Zhang CuiShan tried to pry Xie Xun's arm off of Yin SuSu, but could hardly move it. Seeing Yin SuSu about to die, Zhang CuiShan's attacked Xie Xun, hitting the 'Shen Dao Point' on Xie Xun's back. His fist felt like hitting a solid rock, while Xie Xun continued his grip on Yin SuSu. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "If you don't let go, I'm going to use weapons." When he saw Xie Xun ignoring him, Zhang CuiShan took out his Judge's Brush and pointed at Xie Xun's 'Xiao Hai Point' on his arm. Xie Xun retracted his right hand from Yin SuSu, and grabbed the brush with it, then threw the brush into the sea.

Feeling the grip loosening, Yin SuSu quickly spun out of his hold. Xie Xun's left hand reached for Zhang CuiShan's head, while his right hand tried to grab Yin SuSu's shoulder, tearing off a piece of Yin SuSu's seal coat. Zhang CuiShan knew that if he simply dodged Xie Xun's attacks, Yin SuSu would be caught. So instead of running away, he attacked Xie Xun, using the Soft Palm's 'Carefree Flying Flower'. Strangely, when his palm met Xie Xun's, he felt like being pulled in, unable to get free.

After controlling Zhang CuiShan, Xie Xun dragged him along while chasing Yin SuSu. Yin SuSu jumped away, but before she could get back to the ground, Xie Xun stomped on the ice with his foot, and several ice pellets flew out, all hitting her on the right leg. Yin SuSu let out a scream and fell down.

Xie Xun then sent out a huge force towards Zhang CuiShan, pushing him backward, flying. This push was so strong Zhang CuiShan landed by the edge of the iceberg. With a slip as he tried to regain his footing, Zhang CuiShan fell off the edge, into the sea.

End of Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 - Who Sent the Ice Boat to This Heavenly Village

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan embraced Yin SuSu tightly as they rolled a few times on the ground, getting out of the way, only to hear loud sounds of ice cracking, as Xie Xun smashed his mace wildly on the icy surface surrounding him. He then put down the mace, raised a roughly hundred-pound ice over his head, paused a moment to hear their location, before hurling the ice towards Zhang and Yin's direction.

The silver hook in the left hand reached out, holding onto the ice mountain, then Zhang CuiShan sprung back up to the surface. He thought Yin SuSu must be in Xie Xun's hands by now. But instead, only to see Xie Xun's hands covered his eyes, yelling in pain, while Yin SuSu lied on ice.

Zhang CuiShan quickly picked her up. Yin SuSu whispered, "I... I hit his eyes..." Before she could finish, Xie Xun let out a roar, charged at them. Zhang CuiShan embraced Yin SuSu tightly as they rolled a few times on the ground, getting out of the way. Only to hear loud sounds of ice cracking, as Xie Xun smashed his mace wildly on the icy surface surrounding him. He then put down the mace, raised a roughly hundred-pound ice over his head, paused a moment to hear their location, before hurling the ice towards Zhang and Yin's direction.

Yin SuSu wanted to run away, but Zhang CuiShan held her still. The two of them hid in a depressed region of the iceberg, neither even dared to breath loudly. But after throwing and missing that block of ice, Xie Xun became motionless, as if trying to hear their location. Zhang CuiShan saw blood trickling down his eyes, knew that Yin SuSu at the last moment finally released her silver needles. And in his mad, unconscious state, Xie Xun was not able to block them in time, becoming a blind man. Yet his hearing is still just as great. Should they make even the slightest noise, Xie Xun

would find them. Thankfully, with the sounds of waves, wind, and ice hitting each on the sea, Xie Xun could not hear their breaths. Otherwise, they'd probably be dead by now.

After listening for a while, and still unable to locate them, Xie Xun felt the pain in his eyes. With the shock of only darkness meeting his gaze, in addition to his innate anger, Xie Xun suddenly let out a terrible scream, then began to thrash his surrounding area senselessly. He would pick up pieces of ice and throw them wildly in different directions. Only to hear 'ping, ping' sound endlessly. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu embraced each other tightly; so scared their faces became pure white. As the endless waves of ice came in their direction, both knew that even getting hit by one of them could mean instant death.

Xie Xun did this for about an hour, but to Zhang and Yin, it felt like years.

Realizing the futility of throwing ices, Xie Xun suddenly stopped, said, "Mr. Zhang, Miss Yin, I was temporarily a bit reckless, as insanity took over my mind. Sorry about the trouble I've caused. Please forgive me." He said these words in a courteous tone, as if returning to his original state.

But after their experience, neither Zhang nor Yin dared to respond. Xie Xun repeated his apology several times, and when he realized there would be no response, stood up. Xie Xun sighed, said, "I don't blame you for not forgiving me." As he spoke, he took a very deep breath. Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized something, for Xie Xun breathed the exact same way before he let out the howl on WangPan Island. Of course, his howling would not be affected by his blindness. In this critical moment, there's no time for them to cover their ears. So without thinking too carefully, Zhang CuiShan grabbed Yin SuSu and jumped down into the sea.

Before Yin SuSu knew what's going on, Xie Xun began to howl. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu drowned into the water, which also covered their ears. Zhang CuiShan's left hand grabbed onto the iceberg with his hook, while his right hand embraced Yin SuSu. Other than his left hand, all parts of their bodies remained underwater. Yet even so they could still feel the vibrations from Xie Xun's howl. The iceberg continued to travel northward, carrying them along. Zhang CuiShan was thankful that he used and lost his brush earlier. Had he lost his hook, even if Xie Xun's howl hadn't kill them, the sea would have.

After a while, the two people raised their mouths over the water surface to change air, as their ears remained underwater. Only after six such exchanges did Xie Xun stop howling. Since the howl used up much of Xie Xun's inner power, he felt tired, and sat down to regain his strength. Zhang CuiShan signaled Yin SuSu, and they climbed back up the iceberg quietly. Both people then ripped off some pieces of sealskin and covered their ears.

They're safe for now, but as long as they reside on the same iceberg as Xie Xun, any noise could mean the end. The two looked at each other with worry, and then gazed upon the western sky, where the sun still had not set. They didn't know that this is the effect from being near the North Pole. Zhang and Yin only felt like being near the edge of the world.

Yin SuSu, unable to withstand the cold water now soaked all over her cloths, shivered, her teeth made some noise as she uncontrollably gritted them. Upon hearing such noise, Xie Xun screamed, grabbed his mace and charged at them. Zhang and Yin were prepared, and quickly evaded, only to hear a loud 'Ping!', as the mace smashed down on the iceberg surface with at least six hundred pounds of force,

causing seven pieces of huge ice chunks to fly in all directions. Astonished at the sight, the two then saw Xie Xun sweep the mace in their direction. This mace is already over three meters in length. With this sweep, its power extended to over fifteen meters, forcing them backward. After retreating a just few steps, they've arrived at the iceberg's edge.

Yin SuSu gasped, but Zhang CuiShan grabbed her wrist, gathered his energy, and jumped into the water. While in midair, they heard loud crackling noises from behind, as several pieces of ice hit them in the back, causing much pain. At the time of his jump, Zhang CuiShan targeted a table-sized ice sheet near the iceberg. He took out his silver hook and grabbed on to it. When Xie Xun heard them splash into the sea, he knocked loose several pieces of ice to throw at them. But because of his blindness, plus the fact that Zhang and Yin moved away from their splash point quickly, Xie Xun could not hit them. After missing with the first ice block, he stopped throwing.

The ice sheet Zhang and Yin held onto traveled much faster than Xie Xun's iceberg. By nightfall, they've traveled so far away Xie Xun looked like a tiny speck.

It's quite lucky that the two of them managed to hold on to this ice sheet. However, they couldn't stay forever in this cold water. Thankfully, another iceberg appeared after a while. As the ice sheet floated next to it, Zhang and Yin quickly climbed up on top of this new iceberg.

Zhang CuiShan said, "I know people say that 'Heaven will always give humans a path out', but did it have to force so much suffering upon us first. How is your body?" Yin SuSu said, "Too bad we couldn't bring some of the seal meat. Are you injured?" They spoke some more, with neither able to

hear the other. Then both paused a moment, and hurriedly took out the sealskin from their ears. For while they were escaping, neither remembered to take out the sealskin.

After going through so much adversity together, their hearts became even closer. Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu. Let us simply die on this iceberg, so we'll never again part." Yin SuSu said, "I need to ask you something, but you can't lie to me. If we were still on the mainland, without having gone through this hardship together. If I were just as intent on being married to you, would you still want me?"

Zhang CuiShan hesitated a bit, said, "I think we wouldn't have been this close this quickly. Besides.... There would be lots of problems. Our sects are so different..." Yin SuSu sighed, said, "I feel the same way. That's why when you were matching palms with Xie Xun on the boat, I thought about firing my silver needles, but in the end did not."

Zhang CuiShan asked, "Oh yeah, why didn't you? I've always thought that you couldn't see clearly in the dark. That you were afraid to unintentionally hit me." Yin SuSu whispered, "That's not the reason. The reason is, had I injured him, and we ended up back on the mainland, you wouldn't want to be with me."

Zhang CuiShan felt his heart melting away, yelled, "SuSu!"

Yin SuSu said, "Perhaps you might blame me in your heart. But at that moment, I only wanted to be with you, go to a deserted island, where we can be with each other forever. Therefore, what Xie Xun proposed was my wish too." Zhang CuiShan never expected her love for him to be so strong. With much appreciation in his heart, Zhang CuiShan said soothingly, "I would never blame you. Instead, I thank you for being so good to me." Yin SuSu remained in his embrace, looked up into his eyes, said, "I don't blame Heaven at all for

sending us to this cold, hellish place, for instead I feel happy. I only hope this iceberg would never go south, for should we one day returned to the mainland, your master would hate me, and my dad might kill you...”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Your dad?” Yin SuSu said, “My dad is White-Browed Eagle King Yin TianZheng, the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Oh, I see. Don’t worry. I told you I’d always be with you. No matter how mean your dad is, he’s not going to kill his son-in-law.” Yin SuSu’s eyes brightened, her cheeks turned red, said, “Oh, do you really mean that?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Let us get married right now.”

The two of them then got on their knees. Zhang CuiShan said loudly, “With the Heaven above watching, Zhang CuiShan today will marry Yin SuSu. Share our blessings together, endure our hardships together, never to be apart.” Yin SuSu prayed sincerely, “Please let the Heaven bless us, so we can be couples for all lifetimes*.” She paused a bit, then added, “Should we ever return to the central plains, I will renounce my old ways, change for the better, and follow my husband to do only good, never to kill again. If I fail to do so, then banish me down to the depths of Hell.”

*Ancient Chinese believes in reincarnation. She simply meant that they would be husband and wife in every single incarnation in the future.

Zhang CuiShan, exhilarated at her promise, held her tightly in his arms. Despite being soaked in icy cold water, the two people’s hearts felt warm and dry, as if blown by spring wind.”

After a long time, the two of them realized that they have not

eaten for a long time. Zhang CuiShan looked over the edge with his silver hook, only to see fishes swim on the sea surface, and caught some. The fishes in this region are filled with fat to counter the cold weather, which made them extremely smelly, but also really reenergized the two. Sitting on this iceberg, Zhang and Yin knew there's no chance for them to return, but neither felt sad because of it. They were now no longer bothered by the long days and short nights, and stopped bother to count the days altogether.

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One day, Yin SuSu suddenly saw a stack of smoke from the north. Shocked, she yelled, "Fifth brother!" and pointed at the smoke as she spoke. Zhang CuiShan, happy and surprised, yelled, "Could there be people living there?"

Although the smoke looked big, it's still far away. Even after a day of travel, the smoke still seemed just as far. However, the smoke eventually grew bigger and bigger, until later on, they could see sparks of fire.

Yin SuSu asked, "What is that?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, did not respond. Yin SuSu screamed, "Oh no, this is the end! This is... is the door to the underworld." Zhang CuiShan had also been alarmed for some time now, but he still tried to sooth her, said, "Perhaps someone's making the fire over there." Yin SuSu said, "Who can make a fire this big?"

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Since we're have no other choice, let's just see what the Heaven has in store for us. If Heaven doesn't want us to freeze to death, but rather burn to death, then we don't really have a choice."

Oddly enough, the iceberg headed exactly towards the direction of the stack of fire. Zhang and Yin didn't know the

reason, thought that they must have been fated to go there. In actuality, that stack of fire is a volcano. With the fire spurting out, the neighboring waters warmed up. Warm water flows south, so the southern cold water obviously moves north, towards the island to take its place.

After another day, the iceberg finally reached the bottom of the volcano, only to see the fire stack surrounded by green vegetation, for it's actually an island. Neither of them had ever seen a volcano, so they didn't know this island was created by the eruptions. The eastern side of the island had no vegetation, though, as it's the path where the lava traveled down to the water. This place is quite close to the North Pole, but due to the continuous volcanic activities, the island had weather similar to the Long White Mountain and the Black Dragon River regions*. Snow covered the upper mountain, but plants filled the lower parts. Pine and Cypress trees here are incredibly big, plus there are all sorts of strange flowers and tress, none seen on the mainland.

*Note: Those are the northeastern-most regions in China.

Yin SuSu stared for a while, then with both hands held Zhang CuiShan's neck, yelled, "Fifth brother, we're arrived at a celestial island!" Zhang CuiShan was also joyous, but could not find any words to say. He then saw a drove of spotted deer eating grass. Looking around, Zhang CuiShan could not find anything scary other than the fire stack.

But just as the iceberg neared the island, the warm water gave it a push backward, and it began to float away. Yin SuSu yelled in a hurry, "Oh no! We can't get on the celestial island now!" Zhang CuiShan realized that if they didn't get on this island now, they'd be washed away. He quickly chipped off a big block of ice, and then let it drop with them down into the water. After paddling with their hands for a while, they finally

reached land.

When the drove of deer saw them, they only stared, as if wondering whom these humans were, but certainly not afraid. Yin SuSu moved close, reached out and patted one of them on the back, said, "If there were some celestial cranes here, I'd say this would be the Celestial Region of the South Pole." Suddenly the ground under her shook, and she fell down. Zhang CuiShan yelled in shock, "SuSu!" As he tried to help her, he also felt his legs wobble, and unable to maintain his balance.

Only to hear a thunderous sound, the earth shook, for the volcano erupted some lava. After getting over the initial shock, and saw no other troubles, both people got up giddily. Due to their exhaustion, the two then slept for about eight hours.

When they woke up, the sun still had not set. Zhang CuiShan said, "Let's go look around, see if there are any people, or perhaps poisonous insects or wild beasts." Yin SuSu said, "Just look at how tame these deer are. Looks like this celestial island is quite peaceful." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "I hope that's the case. But if so, we should at least go pray to the celestial being here."

Even while on the iceberg, Yin SuSu kept her appearance nice, her clothing straight. Now on this island, she cared even more about appearances. So only after she straightened her dress, and then combed Zhang CuiShan's hair, did Yin SuSu care to explore. She held her sword. Zhang CuiShan lost his brush, so he grabbed a tree branch to replace it. The two of them used their lightness kung fu, ran for about 7 miles, from south to north, exhilarated to be in such an environment. On their way, other than passing by small hills and tall trees, they also saw strange grasses and flowers. Above the plants

flew many birds that they've never seen before, but seemed friendly.

They made a turn and went through a large forest, only to see a stone mountain on the island's northwestern corner. There is a cave on the mountain. Yin SuSu yelled, "This place is amazing!" and quickly ran over to the cave. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Be careful!" Before he could finish, they heard a loud groan, as a white shadow flashed by them; a large white bear came rushing out the cave.

That bear's incredibly big, the size of a huge bull. Yin SuSu gasped in shock, and instantly retreated. The white bear stood up, raised his paws, then came slashing down on Yin SuSu. Yin SuSu raised her sword and attacked the bear's shoulder. Unfortunately, her body's too weak from the time on the sea, so despite striking the bear's shoulder directly, she could not pierce deep enough to cause a serious wound. Before she got off another strike, the bear came close and knocked her sword down. Zhang CuiShan quickly yelled, "SuSu, get out of the way!" as he ran up to join her. Then he swept the branch horizontally, hitting the bear on the left kneecap. Only to hear a loud crack, as the branch split in two, but broke the white bear's left leg too. After experiencing such an injury, the bear roared in pain, and came pounding on Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan jumped up several meters using the 'Cloud Stairs' lightness kung fu, and wrote the last stroke of 'compete'[a stroke that comes straight down before making a tiny hook left] with his hook. The silver hook dropped straight down from midair, piercing the bear's 'Sun Point'. After penetrating a few inches, that white bear began to howl in a deafening tone. It started to roll on the ground in pain, pulling the silver hook out of Zhang CuiShan's hand. After rolling for a while, it stopped struggling, fell dead.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands, said with a smile, "Great lightness kung fu, great hook technique!" Suddenly she heard Zhang CuiShan yell, "Jump over here, quickly!" Yin SuSu could hear the fear in his voice, and jumped toward Zhang CuiShan without hesitation. When she turned around, Yin SuSu couldn't help but scream in shock. For another white bear stood right behind her previous position, looking incredibly ferocious. With no weapons in his hand, Zhang CuiShan quickly pulled Yin SuSu up a tall pine tree. That bear kept circling under them, constantly roaring.

Zhang CuiShan broke off a small piece of branch, aimed towards the white bear's eye, and threw it down. When the branch hit its eye, the bear screamed in pain, and tried to climb up the tree in anger. Zhang CuiShan quickly grabbed Yin SuSu's sword, aimed exactly at the bear's head, gathered his energy, and nailed it down straight. The majority of the sword entered the bear's forehead, making it stutter, until finally the bear fell dead under the tree.

Zhang CuiShan said, "I wonder if there's another bear inside the cave." He picked up a few rocks and threw them inside the cave. With no response after a while, he walked inside the cave. Yin SuSu followed closely behind. The cave is wide and deep, very spacious. A streak of light came through in the middle, like a window. Bears' foods filled the cave. Animal carcasses, such as dead fishes, made the whole place very smelly. Yin SuSu pinched her nose, said, "This is a nice place, but too smelly." Zhang CuiShan said, "Well, we can clean the place up. Then after ten or twenty days, the smell would be gone."

Yin SuSu remembered that they'd be living here together forever, with endless months to enjoy ahead, until they die of old age. She felt delighted, but lonely at the same time.

Zhang CuiShan walked out the cave, broke several branches, and made a broom. He went back inside and cleaned the place, with Yin SuSu helping. After they cleaned the cave, the dirty smell remained. Yin SuSu said, "I wish we could get some water to wash this stuff off. Although there are lots of water in the sea, we don't have a bucket to carry it." Zhang CuiShan said, "I have an idea." He left the cave, went to an ice-covered region of the island, and grabbed some large chunks of ice. Then he put the ice chunks on the tallest rock in the cave. Yin SuSu yelled, "Wow, great idea!" The ice would slowly melt, and trickle out the cave as water.

Zhang CuiShan used this water to take a shower. Yin SuSu used her sword to cut the bears into small pieces. Despite being on a volcano, they're still near the North Pole. So the weather's quite cold. The bear meat would likely last for months without rotting. Yin SuSu sighed, said, "People really are greedy, never satisfied. Here I am, thinking how great it would if we could only light a fire, and cook these bear meats." Then she added, "I'm afraid that the ice chunks would melt too slowly, and the smell would never go away." Zhang CuiShan looked at the volcano, said, "Well, there's certainly fire here, but simply too big for us. I'm sure we can find a way to get it, though."

That night, after eating bear meat, the two slept on the tree. During their sleep, both felt like they're still on the iceberg, moving with the current. Actually, they only felt the wind blowing on the branches.

The next day, before she even opened her eyes, Yin SuSu said, "What an amazing fragrance!" She jumped off the tree, only to smell a lovely fragrance coming from the flowers nearby. Yin SuSu said happily, "It's so great that there are all these flowers in front of the cave."

Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu, don't be so thrilled yet. I need to tell you something." Upon seeing his serious expression, Yin SuSu paused a moment, then said, "What?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I found a way to get fire." Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Oh! You're so mean. I thought you were going to give me some bad news."

Zhang CuiShan said, "The flame on the fire mountain is so big it's nearly impossible to get close. We'd likely burn to death before reaching it. However, we can use tree barks to tie a long rope, and wait for it to dry. Then..." Yin SuSu cut in, "Great idea! Then we can tie a rock to the end, and throw it at the fire. Then the fire come towards us through the rope."

After eating raw meat for so long, the two were in quite a hurry to get the fire ready. They went to work immediately. After two days, they finally tied together a rope, over three hundred and thirty meters long. After leaving it in the sun for another day, they finally went up the volcano the fourth morning.

Although it looked close, they still had to travel over thirteen miles to get near the top. The temperature rose as they walked up. First they had to take off their seal coats, then more clothing, until they had only one layer on. Even so, they still could not withstand the heat. Both sweated uncontrollably, and their mouths dried up. But with no water or vegetation around, there's nothing they could do.

Zhang CuiShan, with the rope hanging on his back, saw that Yin SuSu's near exhaustion. Afraid for her health, he said, "You wait for me here. I'll go up alone." Yin SuSu said, "Don't speak to me like this again. The worst that can happen is that we'll never have fire. It's no big deal to eat raw meat the rest of our lives." Zhang CuiShan smiled slightly.

After walking another thousand meters or so, the two are almost totally exhausted. Even Zhang CuiShan's superior inner power could not help him withstand the heat. He said half-consciously, let's throw the rope here. If we still can't catch fire, then we'll... we'll..." Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Then we'll just be a wild couple who drink blood and eat raw meat..." and then her body swayed. She almost fell to the ground before grabbing onto Zhang CuiShan's shoulder. Zhang CuiShan picked up a rock from the ground, then tightened it to the rope. He gathered his energy, ran forward a few steps, and threw the rock with all his might.

Only to see the rock disappear in the distance, and the rope eventually straightened, falling down to the ground. The rock's landing spot is still way too far from any fire. After waiting for a long time, until the couple was about to explode from the heart, the rope still remained fireless. Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "I've heard ancient people used wood and stones to make fires. We can try those things. My way certainly doesn't work."

Yin SuSu said, "Even so, this rope is now quite dry. Let's go find some flint. Perhaps we can make a fire with the sword." Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right." And retracted the rope, then tore down a small piece. There are tons of flints here on the volcano. They took one piece and struck it with the sword. Sparks flew out immediately. After the tenth try, fire lit up the bark.

The two people embraced in joy. They took their bark, now a torch, happily back to the cave. Yin SuSu brought a stack of dry branches and grass to keep the fire going.

With a kindle of fire available, everything else, like cooking meat or warming up ice, came easily. The two hasn't eaten

any cooked food since getting on the boat. Both salivated as they watched the meat simmer on the fire.

That night in the warm bear cave, with streams of fragrance flowing, the fire flickering. For the first time since they married, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu enjoyed their first wedding night together.

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The next morning, Zhang CuiShan walked out the cave, looked into the distance, feeling amazingly refreshed. He suddenly noticed a large figure far away, standing by a rock on the beach.

This figure is none other than Xie Xun! Zhang CuiShan couldn't believe his eyes. After going through this ordeal with Yin SuSu, he had expected to live peacefully on this island. Who'd have thought that this monster would come too? In an instant, Zhang CuiShan froze. Only to see Xie Xun staggering toward the inner part of the island. After being blinded, he seemingly could no longer catch fish for food, and in lived in hunger until today. Xie Xun walked a few steps forward, tripped, and fell to the ground.

Zhang CuiShan returned to the cave. Yin SuSu said tenderly, "Fifth brother... you..." When she saw his serious expression, she held back the rest of the words. Zhang CuiShan said, "Xie Xun's here too!" Yin SuSu gasped in shock, whispered, "Did he see you?" But then remembered that Xie Xun's now blind. Her fear lessened somewhat, said, "Surely the two of us can defeat a blind person, right?" Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "He just fainted from hunger." Yin SuSu said, "Let's go take a look!" She tore off some clothing and put them into Zhang CuiShan and her own ears, then grabbed her sword and some silver needles. They went out the cave together.

When they've reached about twenty-five meters from Xie Xun, Zhang CuiShan said loudly, "Elder Xie, do you wish to eat some food?" Upon hearing a person's voice, Xie Xun let out an expression of joy. But once he realized that it was Zhang CuiShan speaking, the joy disappeared. After a long time, he finally nodded. Zhang CuiShan went back to the cave and took out a piece of cooked bear meat. He threw it towards Xie Xun, said, "Please catch it." Xie Xun heard the sound of the meat, quickly grabbed it with his hand, and began to eat.

Zhang CuiShan felt pity for Xie Xun, after seeing such a powerful and proud man weakened like this. Yin SuSu was thinking of something else entirely, "Fifth brother is just too kind-hearted. Wouldn't it be better to let him die of hunger? Saving him could very well bring trouble in the future. Perhaps we'll later both die in his hands." But then she remembered her promise to become a good person. So she did not speak her mind.

After eating half a piece of meat, Xie Xun fell asleep on the ground. Zhang CuiShan made a pile of fire by his side.

Xie Xun slept for a couple of hours before waking up. He asked, "What is this place? Zhang and Yin had been sitting by his side. When they saw him sitting up to speak, both unplugged their right ears so they could hear. Even so, they still kept their right hands near their ears, in case Xie Xun decided to howl. Zhang CuiShan said, "This is a deserted island near the North Pole.

Xie Xun nodded. In this instant, thousands of thoughts floated through his mind. After a while, he said, "If so, looks like we have no chance to go back, right?" Zhang CuiShan said, "That will depend on the will of the Heaven." Xie Xun

said angrily, "Don't give me that 'Heaven' crap. He searched around for the piece of meat, and began eating again. Then he asked, "What do you plan to do with me?"

Zhang CuiShan looked at Yin SuSu, as he wanted to hear her opinion. Yin SuSu made a gesture, which meant he could decide for them both.

Zhang CuiShan thought for a moment, then said, "Elder Xie, We husband and wife..." Xie Xun nodded, said, "Oh, you're married." Yin SuSu's face turned red, but looked very happy. She said, "Actually, we have to thank you as our matchmaker." Xie Xun let out a humph, said, "What are you going to do with me?" Zhang CuiShan said, "We're sorry to have blinded your eyes. But what's done is done. There's no way to turn back time. Since we're fated to come to this island, I doubt we'll ever see the mainland ever again. In that case, we'll take care of you for the rest of your life."

Xie Xun nodded, sighed, and said, "I guess there's no other choice." Zhang CuiShan said, "Due to our deep love for each other, we have agreed to live and die together. Should the elder ever become crazy again, and kills one of us, the other would surely not live alone in this world." Xie Xun said, "I know what you're trying to say. That should you two die, there's no way for me to live on this island alone, right?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Correct!" Xie Xun said, "If so, then why haven't you taken out the cloths in your left ears yet?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu smiled at each other, and took out the cloth in their left ears too. Both thought, "Despite his lack of sight, this person's hearing is amazing, almost to the point where they could replace his eyes. Plus with his intelligence and knowledge, this person might not even need us if he weren't on this cold, strange island."

Zhang CuiShan asked Xie Xun to name this deserted island. Xie Xun said, "Since this island is covered in ice year-round, yet also has a never-ending supply of fire. Let's call it Fire-Ice Island."

From then on, the three of them settled peacefully on this Fire-Ice Island. There's another small cave about a thousand meters from the bear cave. Zhang and Yin cleaned it up for Xie Xun to live. They then caught fish and animals for food, burned pottery to make bowls, gathered soil to make a kitchen, and made all sort of crude items for everyday use.

Xie Xun never bothered to chat with them. He only held up that Dragon Saber, deep in thought. Sometimes Zhang and Yin would pity him, and advise him to stop trying to figure out its secrets. Xie Xun said, "You think I don't know that it's useless to find its secret, now that we're on this deserted island? But with nothing else to do, how else am I going to spent the days?" The couple found his words reasonable, and stopped trying to persuade him.

Soon, months passed. One day, the couple strolled up the northern part of the island, only to see a forest after walking about 6 miles. Zhang CuiShan wanted to explore the forest, but Yin SuSu was reluctant, said, "Who cares about all the strange creatures in the forest? Let's just go back."

Zhang CuiShan found this weird, wondered, "SuSu has always been the curious type. Yet lately, she has become quite lazy." Concerned for her health, he asked, "Are you ok? Is there something wrong?" Yin SuSu's face turned red, said timidly, "I'm ok." Zhang CuiShan found her expression unusual, and kept asking. Yin SuSu finally said, "Perhaps the Heavens thought we're too lonely, so he sent another person to live with us." Zhang CuiShan paused for a second, then felt like he's in Heaven. He yelled, "You have a child?" Yin

SuSu said in a hurry, "Don't speak so loudly. Someone might hear you." When she spoke this, Yin SuSu couldn't help but start laughing. In this desolate place, who could possibly hear them?

The weather changed. By now, the days became shorter and the nights longer, until there's only about four to five hours of daylight. The temperature also dropped. After becoming pregnant, Yin SuSu became more and more fatigued. Yet she still managed to cook, sew, and do other household chores.

Tonight marked the tenth month of her pregnancy. With the fire roaring in the cave, the couple chatted together. Yin SuSu said, "Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" Zhang CuiShan said, "A boy would look like me. A girl would look like you. Both would be great." Yin SuSu said, "No, I prefer a son. Why don't you give him a name?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Yeah..." But then he remained silent for a long time. Yin SuSu said, "Is there something wrong? You've been acting weird the past few days." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, it's nothing. Perhaps I'm a bit too happy knowing I'm going to be a father!"

Despite having just spoken a lighthearted comment, Zhang CuiShan's expression remained quite sullen. Yin SuSu said, "Fifth brother, keeping me in the dark would only make me worry more. There must be something wrong."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Hopefully it's just my imagination. But Xie Xun's expression the past few days didn't look right." Yin SuSu gasped, said, "I also noticed. He's becoming more and more vicious, as if he's about to become insane again." Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "He must be frustrated at his inability to unlock the Dragon Saber's mystery." Yin SuSu cried, said, "Before, the worst that could

happen would be to die, but... but now..."

Zhang CuiShan held her in his embrace, said soothingly, "You're right. We must value our lives now, for our son. Should Xie Xun really get out of control, we would have to kill him. Due to his blindness, I'm sure we can defeat him somehow."

Yin SuSu had become much more compassionate since becoming pregnant. Before, she could easily kill tens of people without so much as blink. Now, she felt bad even when killing a wild animal. One day, when Zhang CuiShan caught a deer back to the cave, a fawn came back with him. Yin SuSu forced him to release the mother deer, said that she'd rather eat fruits than to leave the fawn motherless. So when Yin SuSu heard Zhang CuiShan spoke of killing Xie Xun, her body trembled.

Zhang CuiShan obviously felt this reaction, looked at her fondly, and said, "Hopefully, that won't be necessary. But we still must make guard against him." Yin SuSu said, "You're right. But how would we control him? Perhaps put some poison in his food... No, let's not do that. Perhaps we're just being too paranoid."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I have a plan. Tomorrow, we'll move to the inner area of the cave. I'll dig a deep hole by on the outer part of the cave, then put some mud and twigs over it." Yin SuSu said, "But you have to go hunt everyday. What if he caught you outside?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Don't worry. It's easy for me to escape by myself. Should he attack me, I'll just escape to a dangerous cliff or something. Without vision, Xie Xun cannot catch me."

The next morning, Zhang CuiShan began to dig his hole. Without an iron shovel, he had to rely on thick branches.

Obviously this makes the job much more tedious. But thanks to his great inner power, Zhang CuiShan managed to finish it in seven days, a ditch about 10 meters deep. He saw Xie Xun's expression becoming less and less stable each day, often swinging the Dragon Saber wildly. So Zhang CuiShan dug the hole a bit deeper, until it's now over sixteen meters deep. He prepared some sharp, wooden spikes to put on the bottom, and gathered some stones by the side. Should Xie Xun ever fall into the hole, Zhang CuiShan could use the stones to smash him.

This afternoon, Xie Xun came by the bear cave, and began to pace around outside. Zhang CuiShan didn't dare work at this time, afraid that Xie Xun would suspicious. He also didn't dare hunting today, only guard by the mouth of the cave, watching Xie Xun's movements. Only to hear Xie Xun curse endlessly. He cursed the Heaven, the Buddha, Avalokitesvara, the Emperor of Heaven, the Lord of the Underworld, past human emperors, like 'Yao-Shun-Yu-Shang*' and 'Qin Emperor-Tang Zong*'. And then scholars like Confucius and Meng Zi*, generals like Guan Yun* and Yue Fei*. Just about every single notable scholar or hero in the past, he cursed. Xie Xun's a very knowledgeable person. So Zhang CuiShan was actually quite amused by his rants on historical figures.

*Note: Yao, Shun, Yu, and Shang are four important emperors in the China's VERY early days. I think in the 'Zhou' era. Certainly before the Spring-Autumn era and the Warring-Nations era. 'Qin Emperor' here denotes Qin Shi Huang, the emperor who united China (and built the Great Wall). 'Tang Zong' denotes Tang Tai Zong, the second emperor of the Tang dynasty, Li ShiMin. Tang Tai Zong is Li ShiMin's imperial name. I'm sure everyone knows Confucius(look him up if you don't). Although I don't know much about Meng Zi, other than the fact that he's famous scholar. I think most people

know about Guan Yun, very famous person in the Three-Kingdoms era. Yue Fei is the famous general in the Southern Song dynasty. Anyone familiar with Jin Yong's "Eagle Shooting Hero" should know him.

Suddenly, Xie Xun began to curse the people in the martial world, making people like Shaolin's originator Da Muo, or Divine Fist Yue WuMu, sound worthless. But at least he's not cursing blindly. Xie Xun seemed to know the exact weaknesses of all the people and sects he cursed. Only to hear him curse the Tang dynasty fighters followed by the Sung dynasty fighters, ending with the greats of the Southern Sung, East Heretic, West Poison, South Emperor, North Beggar, and Central Theurgist. Followed by Guo Jing, Yang Guo, and finally Wu Dang's originator Zhang SanFeng.

Zhang CuiShan couldn't bare Xie Xun curse his master, and about to rebut, when Xie Xun suddenly yelled, "Humph, Zhang SanFeng is a piece of bad crap. His disciple Zhang CuiShan is a bigger piece of crap. Let me go strangle his wife to death first!" As he spoke, Xie Xun walked past Zhang CuiShan and into the cave.

Zhang CuiShan hurried inside, only to hear a crashing noise, as Xie Xun fell into the hole. Unfortunately, the spikes had not been put in yet, so Xie Xun was only startled, but not injured. Zhang CuiShan quickly picked up one of the branches he used to shovel dirt. When he reached the hole, Zhang CuiShan saw Xie Xun climbing back up. He immediately attacked Xie Xun with the branch. When Xie Xun heard the sound of the branch, his left hand reached out, grabbed the branch, and pulled it down. Zhang CuiShan could not hold on as the branch darted out of his hand. This pull was quite powerful, so the branch left Zhang CuiShan's palm filled with blood. Along with this pull, Xie Xun once again fell back down the hole.

Yin SuSu had been going into labor for over half a day now. It's just that with Xie Xun walking outside, she couldn't tell her husband, for it might break his concentration. But at this critical moment, she no longer cared for all that. Yin SuSu bit her teeth, got up, and threw her sword at Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed the sword, thought, "This person's kung fu is far superior to mine. Even if I attack him, he's bound to take the sword away from me." But then he realized, "His eyes are blind. The only reason he took my branch is because it made a sound."

Just as he understood this, Xie Xun let out a laugh, and began to climb up again. Zhang CuiShan saw exactly where he would climb up, pointed his sword down at Xie Xun's head, and did not move. Xie Xun climbed up with immense speed, going exactly towards the point of the sword, which gave no noise while remaining motionless. No matter how great Xie Xun's kung fu, he could not possibly detect the sword. Only to see the sword pierce into Xie Xun's head, who immediately let out a scream. When the sword entered about a centimeter into his head, Xie Xun quickly reacted, changing his direction in the opposite manner, immediately falling back into the hole. Had he been late by even a second, the sword would've killed him. However, even though his life is fine, the sword still made a serious wound. Blood poured down Xie Xun's face, as the sword stuck on top of his head.

Xie Xun took out the sword and tore out a piece of cloth to cover the wound. He knew that his wound is serious, but nonetheless did not care. Taking out his Dragon Saber to protect his head, Xie Xun tried for the third time to climb out. Zhang CuiShan tried to throw rocks at him, but Xie Xun cut them down with the Dragon Saber. With his saber shining

brightly, Xie Xun climbed out of the hole, began to walk towards Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan backed off step by step. He felt saddened, for today he will die with Yin SuSu, never to see his child born.

Xie Xun didn't want Zhang CuiShan or Yin SuSu to walk past him to leave the cave. For then, he'd have no way to catch them. So with the sword in his left hand and the Dragon Saber in his right, Xie Xun unleashed techniques that covered a lot of area, sealing a five-meter width besides him which no one could go past.

When suddenly, he heard a 'Waaaaahhhhh' sound, as the sound of a baby's cry came out of the inner cave. Xie Xun gasped in shock. He immediately stopped walking and froze, hearing the baby cry continuously.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu realized that they were going to die. So they forgot all about Xie Xun, and instead put all their attention on the newly born baby. The baby is a son, his arms and legs kept moving, while crying loudly. Zhang and Yin realized that once Xie Xun's saber came slicing down, both of them, plus the baby, would all immediately die. Neither spoke, their gaze on the baby. Both thanked fate for being so kind, allowing them to see their baby before death. Even a single extra moment right now, meant a single extra blessing to them. In this instant, the couple felt an unusual serenity, not thinking at all about their future. Obviously, both wanted the child to live on, but since this was impossible, they did not dare to hope.

Only to hear the baby cry continuously, when suddenly, Xie Xun's conscience reappeared, his madness dissipated. He suddenly remembered the moment his whole family was killed, for it was soon after his wife gave birth. His child died that day too. This baby's cry made him remember many

things in his past: The love between him and his wife, the brutality of his enemy, the innocent baby thrown by his enemy into the wall and turning into a bloody pulp, cutting off his own finger, trying to get revenge, only to fail each time, getting the Dragon saber, but unable to find its secret... He stood in a trance, sometimes smiling, sometimes biting his teeth.

Right before this moment, the three of them were in a life and death duel, but after the baby cried, all of them suddenly turned their attention to the baby.

Xie Xun suddenly asked, "Is the baby a boy or a girl?" Zhang CuiShan said, "He's a boy." Xie Xun said, "That's good. Have you cut the umbilical cord yet? Zhang CuiShan said, "Do I need to? Oh, yes, of course. I totally forgot."

Xie Xun turned the sword around, gave it to Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan took the sword and cut off the umbilical cord. Only then did he realize that Xie Xun was by his side, yet did not try to kill them. In fact, he looked very concerned, as if trying to help out.

Yin SuSu said weakly, "Let me hold him." Zhang CuiShan put the baby into her arms. Xie Xun then said, "Do you have some hot water to give the baby a bath?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, I can't believe this. I didn't prepare for anything. What an useless dad I am." He quickly got up to go prepare for some hot water. But after he took a step, Zhang CuiShan saw Xie Xun standing right next to the baby, and stopped in fear for his child. Xie Xun said, "Why don't you watch over the baby with your wife. I'll prepare the water. While speaking, he put the Dragon Saber back on his waist and walked out the cave. As he passed by the hole, Xie Xun simply jumped over it.

After a while, Xie Xun really did come back with a tub of hot water. Zhang CuiShan then gave the baby a bath. Hearing the baby's cry, Xie Xun asked, "Does the child look like his mom or dad?" Zhang CuiShan smiled, said, "More like his mom. Not too heavy, he has a melon-seed-shaped head." Xie Xun sighed, said quietly, "Hopefully, he'll have good luck when he grows up, and not endure too many hardships." Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, are you saying that the baby's appearance is unlucky?" Xie Xun said, "No. It's just that if the child looked like you, he'd be too handsome. I was just afraid that his good fortune is too thin. And when he enters society, will face much difficulty." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Elder, you're thinking too far into the future. We're now at a deserted island by the North Pole. This child will live and die here. How can he possibly return to society?"

Yin SuSu said in a hurry, "No, No! We don't have to return, but do you really want our child to live here forever? When all three of us die, who will accompany him? After he grows up, how is he going to get married and have kids?" Yin SuSu had always been vicious while living under the Heavenly Eagle Sect's influence. But ever since she became married to Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu turned gentler and kinder. Now that she's a mother, her heart is only filled with love for her son, and only wished the best for him.

Zhang CuiShan looked at her, massaged her hair, thought, "We're thousands of miles from mainland. How can we possibly get back?" But he didn't want to hurt her feelings, and remained silent.

Xie Xun suddenly said, "Mrs. Zhang is right. The three of us don't really have any future. But there's no way we can let this child grow up and die here, never to enjoy the life of a normal person. Mrs. Zhang, the three of us should come up with a way to get this child back to mainland."

Yin SuSu was exhilarated, tried to get up. Zhang CuiShan quickly stopped her, said, "SuSu, what are you trying to do? You need to more rest." Yin SuSu said, "No, fifth brother. Let us kowtow to this elder, for his willingness to help our son."

Xie Xun shook his hand, said, "No need. Have you given this child a name yet?" Zhang CuiShan said, "No. Elder Xie, you're very knowledgeable. Perhaps you should name him!" Xie Xun said, "Ok. He needs to have a good name. Let me think..."

Yin SuSu thought, "It's so great that he actually loves this child. If he thought of the child as his own, then the child will be safe on this island. Even if Xie Xun gets mad, he still wont hurt his own son." So she said, "Elder Xie, I'd like to ask you, on behalf of the child, for a favor. I hope you'll agree to it." Xie Xun said, "What favor?"

Yin SuSu said, "That you accept this child as your godson! So as he grow up, he can treat you like his own father, and you can raise him as your son. Fifth brother, do you not think this is a good idea?" Zhang CuiShan knew the reasons for his wife's request, said, "That would be great! Elder Xie, please accept my wife's request."

Xie Xun said, "My own child was thrown to his death as a baby. Have you ever seen that?" Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other. They thought that perhaps his insanity is settling back in. But considering his past, they didn't really blame him. Xie Xun then added, "If my son hadn't died, he'd be eighteen now. Had I taught him all my kung fu, humph, I doubt he'd be worse than your seven Wu Dang heroes." His voice carried both extreme pride and extreme sadness in that last sentence.

The three people stayed silent for a while, before Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie, you really should accept him as your godson, and his surname will become 'Xie'." An expression of extreme joy skimmed through Xie Xun's face. He said, "Are you really willing to let his surname be 'Xie'? My son who passed away was called Xie Wuji." Zhang CuiShan said, "If you like, we'll call this child Xie Wuji."

In his joy, Xie Xun feared that Zhang CuiShan might take his words back, said, "If you gave your son to me, then what about you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "It doesn't matter what the child's surname is. We'll love him just the same. In the future, he'll be filial to his mother, father, and his godfather all equally. What do you think, SuSu?" Yin SuSu paused a moment, said, "I leave everything up to you. A child could only benefit from an extra person loving him."

Xie Xun bowed down, said, "I really wish to thank you. Let us clear all our past differences. Xie Xun had lost a son, but he now gained a son. When Xie Wuji becomes famous in the martial world, everyone would know that his father is Zhang CuiShan, his mother is Yin SuSu, and his godfather is 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun."

Yin SuSu originally hesitated because she thought the name was bad luck, since the original Xie Wuji died as a child. But when she saw the joy on Xie Xun's face, she knew Xie Xun would treat this child as his own, a huge benefit to the child. For the happiness of her child, a mother can give up anything. So she held the baby in her arms, said, "Do you want to hold him?"

Xie Xun reached out his hand, and took the child from her arms. He was so happy he began to weep, and his arms quivered, said, "You... you should take him back. He might be too afraid of my look." Actually, how could a newly born child

know anything about looks? Nonetheless, he did this only because of concern for the child. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "You can hold him for as long as you like. When he grows up, you can take him all over the place to play."

Xie Xun said, "Great, great..." When he heard the child cry, Xie Xun said, "He's hungry. Why don't you feed him. I'll go outside." Actually, considering his blindness, Yin SuSu wouldn't have cared if he stayed. But oddly enough, he has turned into a courteous gentleman.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie..." Xie Xun said, "Hold on. We're one family now. You can't consider me an elder now. How about this, the three of us become sworn brothers and sisters. This will be good to the child too." Zhang CuiShan said, "But you are so much superior to us in ability. We're not worthy." Xie Xun said, "Humph, how could you be so wishy-washy? Fifth brother, fifth sister, are you going to call me big brother or not?" Yin SuSu said with a smile, "I'll call you big brother first. If he still call you 'elder' afterwards, then I'd be his elder too." Zhang CuiShan said, "In that case, I shall consent to big brother's request." Yin SuSu said, "After a few days, when I could get up. We can formally go through the ritual of bonding by bowing to the Heaven."

Xie Xun said, "A true man would never go back on his words. Since we've already verbally agreed, what's the need to bow to Heaven?" As he spoke, he left the cave. Only to hear him laugh loudly and heartily in the open field. Since meeting him, this is the first time Zhang and Yin had ever seen him happy.

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From then on, the three of them concentrated on raising this child. Xie Xun was a hunter as a young man, which was the

reason for his 'Golden-Haired Lion King' nickname. His ability to catch wild animals is second to none. Zhang CuiShan showed him around the island, giving him descriptions to all the places. After a while, Xie Xun became familiar with the geography of the island. From then on, Xie Xun helped out a great deal when it came to hunting animals.

The next few years passed peacefully. The child never got sick, and grew to be quite sturdy. Among the three people, Xie Xun was the most fond of the child. Sometimes when the child became overly mischievous, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu would try to discipline him, but he would run behind Xie Xun for support. After a while, the child became reliant on Xie Xun to help him all the time. Zhang and Yin could only shake their head and laugh. They said that their big brother dote on his godson too much.

When Wuji turned four*, Yin SuSu taught him how to write. On his fifth birthday, Zhang CuiShan said, "Big brother. We can teach our child kung fu now. Why don't you teach him?" Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No. My kung fu is too difficult. He can't learn them yet at this age. You should teach him your Wu Dang's inner power. When he turns eight, I'll teach him my kung fu. After teaching him for two years, you can leave this island!"

*Note: In ancient China, a person's age starts at one when he's born. So Xie Wuji is only three years old in modern age-counting method. Take note of this, since otherwise you'll find that some conversations would otherwise not make sense.

Yin SuSu asked in surprise, "What do you mean? Are you saying we could return to mainland?"

Xie Xun said, "In this past few years, I've noticed the wind

pattern on this island. Every year when the nights are the longest, the northern wind blew. Usually it blows nonstop for at least thirty or forty days. We can make a small raft, and put on a sail. If the Damnable Heaven doesn't interfere, you just might make it back to mainland." Yin SuSu said, "Wait, are you saying that you won't go back with us?" Xie Xun said, "With my blindness, what's the point for me to return to the mainland?" Yin SuSu said, "If you don't go, then how can we let you stay here alone? Our son won't either. Without his godfather, who will love and care for him?" Xie Xun sighed, said, "I'm grateful that I can take care of him for ten years. This Damnable Heaven always likes to piss me off. If this kid stays with me for too long, the bad luck might rub off on him." Yin SuSu shuddered, but thought that Xie Xun simply blurted it out mindlessly, so she didn't really thought much of it.

Zhang CuiShan only taught his son fundamental inner powers. He thought that on this island, his child only needs to be strong, and won't be fighting anyone. Although Xie Xun spoke about returning to the mainland, he never brought it up afterwards. Looks like he didn't really mean that.

In the eighth year, Xie Xun really did make Wuji to learn kung fu with him. When he taught Wuji, Xie Xun did not ask for Zhang and Yin to remain by their side. The couple followed the martial world's rules, and stayed away during those times. They didn't really bother to check on Wuji's progress, since they trust Xie Xun would teach Wuji his best.

There's not much to do on the island. So days and months passed like flowing water. Another year went by quickly.

Ever since Wuji's birth, Xie Xun had something more important to occupy his time than the Dragon Saber. So he ignored it. One night, Zhang CuiShan couldn't sleep. So he

got out of bed to take a walk. He saw Xie Xun sitting on a rock under the moonlight, holding the Dragon Saber, deep in thought. Zhang CuiShan gasped, about to leave, when Xie Xun heard his footsteps. He said, "Fifth brother. It looks like this phrase 'Martial world's most venerable, Precious Saber Dragon Slaying' really is just an empty boast." Zhang CuiShan walked closer, said, "There are many rumors in the martial world. Considering big brother's intelligence, why would you be so keen on finding this saber's secret?" Xie Xun said, "You don't know the whole story. I heard the story of the Dragon Saber from the venerable Reverend Kong Jian of Shaolin."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, Reverend Kong Jian. I heard he's Shaolin abbot's elder martial brother. He died a long time ago." Xie Xun nodded, said, "You're right. Kong Jian died, died in my hands." Zhang CuiShan was taken by surprise, as he remembered a saying in the martial world, "Shaolin's Divine Reverends, Jian-Wen-Zhi-Sheng", which referred to the four best martial artists in Shaolin, Kong Jian, Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and Kong Sheng. Later he heard that Kong Jian died of natural causes. Looks like Xie Xun killed him instead.

Xie Xun sighed, said, "Kong Jian is a very stubborn person. He simply let me hit him, without retaliating. After punching him thirteen times, I finally killed him."

Zhang CuiShan was quite stunned, thought, "Only the top fighters could withstand just one punch from big brother. Yet this reverend could withstand thirteen punches. His body must be harder than steel."

Only to see a mournful expression on Xie Xun's face, as if he really regretted something. Zhang CuiShan figured that there must be an important story behind it. For the past eight years, Zhang CuiShan had much affection for his big brother.

But within that affection hid a bit of fear. Afraid to bring up Xie Xun's sad past, Zhang CuiShan did not dare ask further.

Only to hear Xie Xun say, "There aren't many people in this world whom I respect. Although I've heard much of your master Zhang SanFeng, I've never had a chance to meet him. As for this Reverend Kong Jian, he's a very admirable person. His martial arts reputation is lower than his younger martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, but in my opinion, he's better than both."

Every time Zhang CuiShan heard Xie Xun speak about famous peoples of the world, Xie Xun either dismissed them, or cursed them. It's incredibly rare for him to ever compliment anyone. So Zhang CuiShan was quite surprised to hear Xie Xun speak so highly of Reverend Kong Jian. Zhang CuiShan said, "He must not travel around the world very much, which is why people don't know much about him."

Xie Xun looked into the sky, stared aimlessly, and as if speaking to himself, "Too bad, this venerable reverend allowed me to kill him with thirteen punches. Even though his kung fu is incredible, he's too stubborn. Had he fought me for real, I certainly would not have lived till today." Zhang CuiShan said, "Are you saying that the depth of his martial arts is more than your's?"

Xie Xun said, "I'm nothing compared to him. Not even close! It's the difference between night and day!" Both his voice and his expression showed his great respect for this man.

Zhang CuiShan was quite surprised, and didn't quite believe Xie Xun. He always thought that his master Zhang SanFeng's martial arts is unparalleled. But compared to Xie Xun, Zhang SanFeng is only somewhat better. If this Reverend Kong Jian

really is much superior to Xie Xun, then would he also surpass master Zhang SanFeng? But Zhang CuiShan knew that his big brother never exaggerates with his compliments.

Xie Xun seemed to have read his mind, said, "You don't believe me? Fine, go wake up Wuji. I want to tell a story to him." Zhang CuiShan didn't want to wake up a child in the middle of the night, especially for just a story. But since this is his big brother order, he couldn't disobey. Zhang CuiShan walked back to wake up his son. Wuji yelled 'Great!' when he heard that his godfather wanted to tell a story. This instantly woke up Yin SuSu. So the three of them went outside together.

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Xie Xun said, "Son, soon you'll return to the mainland..." Wuji asked, "What do you mean by 'return to the mainland'?"

Xie Xun held up his hand, telling Wuji to not interrupt him, and continued, "Should you somehow die in the sea, or end up elsewhere, then this will all be pointless. But should you end up back in mainland, I must tell you some things. There are many, many people in this world who are evil and devious. You should not trust anyone. For other than your parents, everyone could try to hurt you. Unfortunately, no one told me this when I was young. Actually, even if someone did, I wouldn't have believed him.

"At the age of ten, by simply a coincidence, I became the disciple of a person with powerful martial arts. My relationship with my master was like father and son. Fifth brother, at that time, my reverence for my master was no less than your reverence for yours. At the age of twenty-three, I finished my training and left. I went to the western regions, and met a bunch of pretty important people. Since we really

hit it off, they considered me on of their brothers. Fifth sister, your father White-Browed Eagle King met me at that time. Afterwards, I married and had a son. My family live happily.

“When I was twenty-eight, my master came by my house to stay for a while. I was absolutely thrilled. My family treated him as one of our own. When my master had some spare time, he gave me some pointers on kung fu. Who’d have thought that this renowned kung fu expert would be a wolf in sheep’s clothing? On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after we had a lot of alcohol, he suddenly tried to rape my wife...”

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped in disbelief, for it’s unheard of for a master to rape his disciple’s wife. It might be one of the most horrible deeds a person could possibly commit.

Xie Xun continued, “When my wife cried out for help, my father forced himself into the room. After getting caught in the act, my master killed my father, and then killed my mother. Then to my infant child Xie Wuji...”

When Wuji heard his name, he asked, “Xie Wuji?”

Zhang CuiShan scolded him, “Don’t interrupt! Just listen.” Xie Xun said, “Yes, that son of mine is also called Xie Wuji. My master grabbed him, and threw him down, turning him into a bloody pulp.”

Wuji couldn’t help but ask again, “Godfather, then can he still... still live?” Xie Xun shook his head, said, “No, No!” Yin SuSu shook her hands at her son, telling him to stop asking.

Xie Xun paused for a while, before continuing, “I froze upon reaching the scene. I didn’t know what to do. What should I

do in front of the man I respect most in life? Suddenly, he hit me right in the chest, and I just took it without really knowing what had happened. When I returned to consciousness, my master had disappeared. My house was filled with dead people, my father, mother, wife, son, brothers, sisters, and servants, thirteen people, all died in his hands. He must've thought I had died from his punch, and therefore left without killing me.

"Afterwards I was sick for a long time. When I recovered, I began to practice kung fu day and night. Three years later, I sought out my master for revenge. Unfortunately, he's way too powerful for me, and I couldn't beat him. But how could I simply let him get away with murdering my family? Therefore I began looking for different kung fu experts, hoping to dramatically improve my kung fu. Five years later, I felt I had gained enough, and sought out master again. Unfortunately, I lost again, as his kung fu remained much more powerful than mine. This time, he also seriously injured me in the process.

"After I recovered from my injuries, I received a . This road of fist technique is unusually powerful. Therefore, I began to practice the inner power for the 'Fists of Seven Damages'. Two years later, I succeeded, and thought that my kung fu should be first class now. Unless my master's kung fu skill had increased a great deal, there's no way he's my match. Who'd have thought that he disappeared? No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't find him. I figured he must've been afraid of me, and hid in some remote village somewhere. But where to find him?

"In my rage, I began to commit crimes everywhere. Killing people, burning down houses, everything. Each time I commit a crime, I'd leave my master's name on the walls!"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both let out a surprising 'Oh!' Xie Xun said, "You know who my master is?" Yin SuSu nodded, said, "Yes, you are the disciple of 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun'."

For about two and a half years ago, many renowned members of the martial world were killed for no reason. Over thirty crimes were committed in half a year, and the murder site would always have the name 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun' written. The victims were all either the leaders of a sect, or an old, famous hero. Every crime involved whole families killed. Any one of these crimes would have been earth shattering in the martial world, much less over thirty of them. At the time, Zhang SanFeng sent all seven of his disciples to investigate, but none of them found any clues on the matter. Everyone thought that someone was trying to frame Cheng Kun. 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun's kung fu is incredible, but has a great reputation and tends to be a recluse. Besides, several of his friends were among the victims. So Cheng Kun couldn't possibly be the murderer. But to find the real killer, they still have to find Cheng Kun first. Who'd have thought that he disappeared all of a sudden? After a while, the cases all had to be laid to rest. Even though hundreds of people want to seek revenge, no one knew who did the crimes. If Xie Xun hadn't personally admitted to these crimes, Zhang CuiShan could never have figured it out.

Xie Xun said, "The reason I committed those crimes was make him reappear. Even if he stayed a coward, it's still much easier to have thousands of people look for him than just me." Yin SuSu said, "That was a great plan, except you had to kill so many poor, innocent people in the process."

Xie Xun said, "So? Are you saying that my family wasn't poor or innocent? You used to be different. I guess after marrying

fifth brother for nine years, you've also become so wishy-washy."

Yin SuSu glanced at her husband, smiled slightly, said, "Big brother, so what happened? Did you ever find Cheng Kun?" Xie Xun said, "No. But later, I saw Song YuanQiao at Luo Yang." Zhagn CuiShan gasped, said, "You mean my eldest martial brother?"

Xie Xun said, "That's right, the eldest of the Wu Dang Seven Heroes. After committing all these crimes, I already turned the martial world upside down. Yet my master 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun..." Wuji said, "Godfather, if he's such a bad person, then why do you still call him 'master'?"

Xie Xun laughed bitterly, said, "It has become a habit. Besides, he taught me the majority of my kung fu. And although he's a terrible person, I'm a not good person either. Perhaps he also gave me my viciousness. Since I learned both the good and the bad from him, I should still call him my master."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "After going through such hardships in life, big brother has stopped caring for morals in his resentment for society. Wuji will certainly remember these things, and it can negatively affect his future. I must remember to talk to him about it later."

Xie Xun continued, "When my master still did not appear, I thought I must commit an incredible crime to get people's attention. Shaolin and Wu Dang are considered the two most prominent organizations in the martial world, so I wanted to kill a famous person from one of these sects. That day in Luo Yang, I saw Song YangQiao kill an infamous local tyrant. His kung fu very formidable, so I decided to kill him."

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, his heart started to beat faster. Even though he knew his eldest martial brother did not die, the words still made him shudder. Xie Xun's kung fu is much superior to eldest martial brother. Besides, one was hidden, one was in the open. Had they really exchanged blows, eldest martial brother would've surely died. Yin SuSu also knew that Song YuanQiao did not die, said, "Big brother. Did your conscience act up? Had you really killed Eldest Hero Sung, this Fifth Hero Zhang would've surely fought you to the death, instead of becoming your sworn brother."

Xie Xun let out a humph, said, "What conscience? If it were today, because of fifth brother, I would surely not harm a Wu Dang member. But I didn't know fifth brother at all back then. At that time, even had fifth brother himself been there instead of Song YuanQiao, I'd still do the same thing."

Wuji asked, "Godfather, why would you want to kill my dad?" Xie Xun smiled, said, "I was just making an analogy. I don't really want to kill your dad." Wuji said, "Oh, I see now," and stopped worrying.

Xie Xun rubbed Wuji's head, said, "Although this Damnable Heaven always pissed me off, but at least he didn't let me kill Song YuanQiao. Or I would've never have become your father's sworn brother." He paused for a moment, then continued, "That night I ate dinner and meditated to gather my strength. I knew that as Zhang SanFeng's eldest disciple, his kung fu must be amazing. Should I let him get away somehow, everyone would know who was behind those crimes. Then my plan would be foiled, not to mention just about everyone in the martial world would want my head. My life wasn't a big deal, but I couldn't die before getting my revenge."

Zhang CuiShan asked, "So what happened between you and my eldest martial brother? Odd, he never brought this up with us."

Xie Xun said, "Song YuanQiao didn't know anything about this. He's probably never even heard the words 'Golden-Haired Lion King, Xie Xun'. Because I never attacked him."

Zhang CuiShan let out a sigh of relief, said, "Thank Heavens!" Yin SuSu said with a smile, "What are you thanking that Damnable Heaven for? You should really thank this Hero Xie instead." Zhang CuiShan and Wuji both started to laugh.

End of Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 - The Journey Home after Ten Years

(Translated by Meh)



Xie Xun grabbed the Dragon Saber, unsheathed it, and 'Swoosh!' cut the tree in half. Then came a loud crash, as the tree fell down. Xie Xun put back his saber, said, "Can you see the power of my 'Fists of Seven Damages' now?"

Xie Xun continued, "I still remember that night as if it were yesterday. I sat in my hotel room, circulating the inner chi in my body, and thought about the 'Fists of Seven Damages' in my head a few more times. Fifth brother, you've never seen my 'Fists of Seven Damages'. Do you wish to take a look?" Before Zhang CuiShan could answer, Yin SuSu cut in, "I'm sure it's without doubt an exquisite fist technique, unparalleled in power. Big brother, how come you didn't go kill Eldest Hero Sung that night?"

Xie Xun chuckled, said, "You're afraid that when I demonstrate, I might hurt your husband, right? Don't worry, if I can't release and retract my power at will, then what kind of 'Fists of Seven Damages' would it be?" As he spoke, Xie Xun stood up, and walked over to a large tree. Accompanied by a roar as loud as the thunder, he punched the tree on the trunk.

Considering Xie Xun's ability, he could at least make a hole in the trunk, if not break the tree outright. Who'd have thought that when Xie Xun retracted his palm, the tree remained perfectly fine. Not even a piece of tree bark fell off. Yin SuSu felt badly for Xie Xun, thought, "Looks like after living on the island for nine years, big brother's kung fu has deteriorated greatly. Well, it's hardly surprising. I've never seen him practice kung fu." But afraid that he'll be sad, she still applauded him.

Xie Xun said, "Fifth sister. Your applause didn't seem very sincere. You're thinking that my ability is not what it used to

be, right?" Yin SuSu said, "On this island, there's only the four of us. What's the need for kung fu?" Xie Xun asked, "Fifth brother, can you see the profoundness in my punch?" Zhang CuiShan said, "You performed this punch using great power. Yet not a single leaf vibrated upon impact. I'm not certain why this is so. Even had Wuji punched the tree, the leaves would have moved."

Wuji yelled, "Yes, I can do that!" He swiftly ran over to the tree and punched on the trunk. The leaves really did move around, causing their shadows to shiver under the moonlight.

Upon seeing the power of their son's punch, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu were both delighted. Both gazed upon Xie Xun, seeking his explanation.

Xie Xun said, "Three days later, the leaves will turn yellow and wither. Half a month later, the tree itself will shrivel up and die. My punch had broken the veins of the tree."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both were hesitant to believe him, but they knew Xie Xun to be a man of his words. So he must be right. Xie Xun grabbed the Dragon Saber, unsheathed it, and 'Swoosh!' cut the tree in half. Then came a loud crash, as the tree fell down. Xie Xun put back his saber, said, "Can you see the power of my 'Fists of Seven Damages' now?"

Zhang CuiShan and his family walked over to examine the inside of the tree, only to see most of the tree's water passageways wrecked: some bent, some shattered, some broken into pieces, some only semi-broken. Signs that this punch incorporated many different simultaneous forces. Zhang and Yin were both very impressed. Zhang CuiShan asked, "Big brother. This was an amazing demonstration."

Xie Xun couldn't help but respond in a proud manner, "This punch contained seven different types of force, some hard, some soft, some contain softness within hardness, some contain hardness within softness, some forces sweep across, some strike vertically, and some shrivel. An enemy might block the first force, but not the second one. If he blocked the second one, then how does he deal with the third force? That's where the name 'Fists of Seven Damages' came from, as one can damage the opponent in seven different ways. Fifth brother, remember that day when you matched palms with me? Had I used 'Fists of Seven Damages', you would've immediately lost." Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right."

Wuji wanted to ask his father why he matched palms with godfather, but Yin SuSu immediately shook her head at him, telling him not to inquire further. However, Wuji couldn't help but ask, "Godfather, can you teach me this 'Fists of Seven Damages'?" Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No!" Wuji was disappointed, and wanted to plead some more. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Wuji, don't be silly. This kung fu is too difficult for you. Unless you have incredible inner power, how can you possibly learn it?" Wuji said, "I see. In that case, I'll first make sure to acquire superior inner power first, and then learn it."

Xie Xun shook his head, said, "Actually, there's no need to ever bother with this 'Fists of Seven Damages'! Everyone's body has two chi, yin and yang, plus 'Gold-Wood-Water-Fire-Dirt' five major regions. Your heart belongs to fire, lungs belong to gold, kidneys belongs to water, spleen belongs to dirt, and liver belongs to wood. Seven injuries to one person, or injuries to seven people. Unfortunately, every time you practice this Fists of Seven Damages, you will damage your own body. The 'seven damages' here means seven damages to your body first, then seven damages to your opponents. Had I not injured my veins while practicing 'Fist of Seven Damages', I would've never had problems with madness."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu now realized why despite being such an intelligent, powerful person, Xie Xun would lose his mind on occasions.

Xie Xun continued, “Had my inner power been really high, to the point of Reverend Kong Jian, or perhaps Wu Dang’s Taoist Zhang, I wouldn’t have hurt myself like this. Unfortunately, I was too keen on revenge in my youth. I stole a copy of the from the Kong Dong Sect. Upon getting the manual, I immediately began to practice hastily. I was in a hurry, in case my master would pass away before I complete my training. By the time I realized the side effects, it was already too late. I should’ve recognized something from the beginning. Why would the Kong Dong Sect have such a powerful fist manual, yet couldn’t dominate the martial world? In addition, I realized that the sound of the punches were thunderous and crisp, which was very useful. Fifth sister, do you know why I say this?”

Yin SuSu thought for a moment, then said, “Because its similar to your master’s kung fu?”

Xie Xun said, “You’re right. My master’s nickname is ‘Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation’. His palm carries wind and thunder, its power unimaginable. Once I find him, and use the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ on him, he would surely mistake it for the kung fu I learned from him. By the time he finds out, it would be too late. Fifth brother, don’t blame me for being so devious. Although my master looks coarse, he’s one of the most devious person you’ll ever find. If I don’t try to trick him, how could I get my revenge... sighs, so I’ve told you some of what happened afterwards, right? Anyway, I haven’t gotten to Reverend Kong Jian yet. That night I went over the inner power circulation for ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ three times, and jumped out the wall to look

for Song YuanQiao.

“In the middle of the jump, before I hit the ground, a person suddenly tapped my shoulder from the back. I was quite astonished, for I couldn’t imagine anyone capable of doing that without me noticing. Wuji, think about this for a moment. Had he used his full force to attack me, he could’ve at least seriously injured me. I reached with my hand to grab his arm, only to find nothing there. I then tried to turn around and punch him, but of course didn’t hit anything. So I turned back. Just at this moment, my shoulder was tapped once again from the back. At the same time, a person sighed, said, “ ‘The Sea of Misery is endless, turn around towards the shore.’”

Wuji found this pretty funny, and laughed. He said, “Godfather, is this person playing a game with you?” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both knew that this must be Revered Kong Jian.

Xie Xun continued, “At that moment, I was scared stiff. It was obvious that he could kill me any time he wants to. He spoke ‘the sea of misery is endless, turn around towards the shore’ in a time to blink an eye. Yet he spoke it in a very coherent manner, so I heard every single word clearly, in addition to his merciful, compassionate tone. But at that time, I only felt anger. So I turned around quickly, only to see a white-robed monk standing about thirteen meters from me. As I turned, he was at most two or three feet away from me. Who’d have thought that after that tap, he immediately flew backward thirteen meters. I’ve never dreamed of speed and agility like that.

“At that moment I thought of only one thing, ‘He must be a ghost, someone I killed who’s haunting me now!’ For surely no living person could have this level of lightness kung fu.

Once I figured that he was a ghost, I became braver, yelled, "Look, I don't care if you're a phantom or a ghost. Your old man I am afraid of neither the Heaven nor the Underworld. So do you think a ghost can scare me?" That white-robed monk put his palms together, said, 'Mr. Xie, my name is Kong Jian.' When I heard the words 'Kong Jian', I recalled the saying 'Shaolin's Divine Reverends, Jian-Wen-Zhi-Sheng'. As the first among the four divine reverends, no wonder his kung fu is so formidable."

Zhang CuiShan remembered that this Reverend Kong Jian later died in his big brother's hands, and could help but feel uneasy.

Xie Xun continued, "So I asked, 'Are you Shaolin's Divine Reverend Kong Jian?' That white-robed monk answered, 'I don't deserve the title Divine Reverend. However, I am Shaolin's Kong Jian.' I said, 'We have never met before. Why do you toy with me so?' Kong Jian said, 'I do not dare toy with Mr. Xie. Mr, Xie, may I ask where are you going?' I said, 'Where I go is none of your business.' Kong Jian said, 'If I guessed correctly, you are trying to kill Wu Dang's Hero Song YuanQiao tonight, right?'

"I was surprised that he knew of my intentions. He added, 'You want to commit another crime, one that would shock the entire martial world, so 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun would appear, allowing you to avenge your family's death, right?' I couldn't believe he said my master's name, for I had never told anyone about my master murdering my family. Since this was a hideous crime, my master would surely not tell anyone either. So how could this reverend know?

"At that moment I shuddered, said, 'If reverend can point out my master's location, I will repay you in any way you wish.'

Kong Jian sighed, said, 'Cheng Kun's crime was indeed horrifying. Yet for revenge, you have killed so many people, done so many terrible deeds.' I wanted to say, 'Who asked for your opinion?' But then I remembered his kung fu skills, plus the fact that I needed to ask him for a favor. So I held my anger in check, said, 'I was forced to do these deeds, for Cheng Kun had gone into hiding. With the world so vast, how can I possibly find him?' Kong Jian nodded, said, 'I realize that your heart is filled with bitterness, and nowhere to release them. Hero Sung is the eldest disciple under Wu Dang's Taoist Zhang SanFeng. If you kill him, your crime will be too immense.' I said, 'That is just what I want. The bigger the crime, the more likely I can get Cheng Kun to reappear.'

"Kong Jian said, 'Mr. Xie, if you kill Hero Sung, Cheng Kun would indeed have to appear. Yet the Cheng Kun today is no longer the Cheng Kun of the past. Your kung fu is nowhere near his level. You can't possibly get your revenge.' I said, 'Cheng Kun's my master. Surely I can judge his kung fu better than you can.'

"Kong Jian shook his head, said, 'He has sought after another master, so his martial arts has grown immensely. Although you learned Kong Dong Sect's 'Fists of Seven Damages', you still can't hurt him.' I didn't know what to make of this person. I had never seen him before. Yet he seemed to know everything about me. I hesitated for a moment, then asked, 'How do you know about that?' He said, 'Cheng Kun told me.'"

At this moment, Zhang and Yin both gasped.

Xie Xun said, "You must've been quite surprised to hear this. When I heard it back then, I immediately jumped up, and yelled, 'But how did he know?' He said, 'For the past few years, he has been following you. Only he kept changing his

disguises, so you never recognized him.’ I said, ‘Are you kidding me? I can’t recognize him? He can turn into dust, and I’d still recognize him.’ He said, ‘Mr. Xie, you are certainly a very perceptive person, but for the past years, you cared only for learning martial arts and revenge. You never tried to examine your surroundings. In addition, you were in the light, while he was in the dark. It’s not that you can’t recognize him, but rather you never attempted to recognize him.’

“What he said made a lot of sense. Besides, Reverend Kong Jian is a world-renowned reverend. He can’t possibly lie to me. I said, ‘If so, then how come he just didn’t kill me?’ Kong Jian said, ‘He could have easily killed you had he wanted to. Mr. Xie, you have tried to fight him two times for revenge. Each time he defeated you. Why did he not kill you then? Besides, when you were stealing the , you matched palms with three of the ‘Five Elders of Kong Dong’. Where were the other two elders? Had the other two elders also appeared, do you think you could have escaped?’

“That day after I injured three elders of Kong Dong, I found the other two also injured, which was quite strange. I thought that perhaps Kong Dong Sect had some sort of internal conflict, or another kung fu expert had helped me. So when I heard Reverend Kong Jian spoke of the matter, my mind stirred, said, ‘Did Cheng Kun injure the other two elders?’”

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu found the story more and more bizarre. Despite their experiences in the martial world, neither could figure this particular story out. Both thought Xie Xun was one of the impressive people they’ve ever seen. Yet his master Cheng Kun seemed even more impressive.

Yin SuSu said, “Big brother, did your master really injure the other two elders?”

Xie Xun said, "When I asked Kong Jian, he said, 'Did you see their injuries that night? What did their faces look like?' I thought about it for a while, then said, 'So they really were injured by my master.' That night, I saw the two elders lying on the floor, their faces filled with blood spots. From their appearance, they seemed to have used a powerful Yin-style inner power to attack someone, but an expert forced it back with the 'Art of Origination'. Other than having one's force repelled with 'Art of Origination', only a select few illnesses could provide the same symptoms. Yet that same morning, all five of them were perfectly healthy, so they certainly did not get ill. In the martial world, only my master and I know the 'Art of Origination'.

"Reverend Kong Jian nodded, sighed, said, 'Your master became mad after drinking too much, and unknowingly killed your family. Afterwards he felt incredibly guilty. That is why he did not kill you during those fights. But since you fought so wildly, he had no way to escape unless he injured you. Afterwards he followed you for a few years. You later encountered three major perils. Each time he helped you live through them.' I thought about it, and found that I did go through three life-and-death situations. Each time, my enemies miraculously retreated. Reverend Kong Jian continued, 'He knows that his crimes are too severe, and does not ask for your forgiveness. His only hope is that with time, your pain will lessen. Who knew that your thirst for revenge magnified instead, killing more and more people. Should you kill Hero Song YuanQiao, it would be impossible to clean up this whole mess.'

"I said, 'If so, then ask my master to come see me, so we can settle our differences.' Reverend Kong Jian said, 'Your master says that he has no face to see you. Besides, you are hardly his match anyway. So seeing him would be pointless.' I said,

'I know you are a venerable reverend. You should know about right and wrong. Are you telling me that I should simply forget the death of my family?' He said, 'I am also saddened by your misfortune. But your master did not willingly commit those crimes. Besides, he has since repented. On the account of your past master-disciple relationship, he hoped you would leave him be.' I became quite angry, said, 'If I cannot defeat him, then he can just go ahead and kill me. I would rather die than leave my family unavenged.'

"Reverend Kong Jian thought for a long time, then said, 'Mr. Xie, your master's kung fu is not what it used to be. Even though you've learned the 'Fists of Seven Damages', you are still not his match. If you do not believe me, then try hitting me a few times.' I said, 'I have no quarrel with you, why should I hit you? Although my kung fu is low, the 'Fist of Seven Damages' is nonetheless not easy to absorb.' He said, 'Mr. Xie, let us make a wager. Your master killed thirteen people in your family. Today you can hit me thirteen times. If you can injure me, I will get out of your way. Your master will then come out to see you. Otherwise, you must promise to let go of revenge.' I did not respond. His kung fu is amazing. If my 'Fists of Seven Damages' could not hurt him, then what about my revenge?

Reverend Kong Jian added, 'Let me be frank with you. Since I decided to concern myself in this matter, do you really think I can let you keep hurting others? If you go back to doing good deeds, and give up on vengeance, I can forgive for your past crimes. Otherwise, if you can seek revenge, what about the relatives of those you killed? Do they not deserve their vengeance too?'

"Upon hearing his voice becoming stern, I got quite annoyed, yelled, 'Fine, I will go ahead and give you thirteen punches! You can give up any time you want to. However, do not go

back on your promise. You better ask my master to come see me.' Reverend Kong Jian smiled, said, 'Please go on ahead!' His body was very short and thin, with white hair and white eyebrows, and a gentle, compassionate face. I didn't want to really hurt him. My first fist only used thirty percent of my power. Pang! The fist landed on his chest."

Wuji gasped, yelled, "Did you use the 'Fists of Seven Damages' that destroyed the tree?"

Xie Xun said, "No! I used my master's 'Lightning & Thunder Fist'. When my punch landed, his body lightly shook, and retreated a step. Realizing that this punch can make him back off, I figured the 'Fists of Seven Damages' would probably kill him in three punches. So I added a bit more power to my second punch. Again his body lightly shook, and retreated another step. My third punch incorporated seventy percent of my power. But once again, his body just light shook, and retreated a step. I was surprised, as I have more than doubled my power, yet his expression remained the same. Considering his thin body, my punches should at least break his bones. Yet I found no signs of a competing force to negate my punch. It's as if his body simply absorbed my power.

"I thought that to hurt him, I must use all my power. But if I used full power, he will likely die. Even though I've done many evil deeds, I respected his kindheartedness. So I said, 'Reverend, I cannot stand the fact that you do not return any blows. For taking three punches, I promise that I will not seek out Song YuanQiao.' He said, 'Then what about Cheng Kun?' I said, 'Nothing can change my mind on revenge. Only one of us can live.' I paused for a moment, then added, 'Out of respect for you, I will only look for Cheng Kun himself, and no longer hurt any innocents.'

“Reverend Kong Jian put his palms together, said, ‘That is great. I am glad that you feel this way. On behalf of the martial world, I thank you. It’s just that I really wish to resolve this issue. So please go ahead and finish the rest of your punches.’

“I realized that only by using the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ could I make my master appear. Thankfully, I can retract the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ power at will. So I said, ‘I am sorry to offend you!’ and followed with my fourth punch. This time I used the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’. His chest tightened, and then he stepped forward.”

Wuji said, “That’s strange. How come he didn’t retreat like before?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Did he use Shaolin’s Divine Art ‘Diamond Armor Invincible Body’?”

Xie Xun nodded, said, “Fifth brother, you really are knowledgeable. That’s correct. When this punch connected, I felt totally different from the previous three punches. This time, his body produced a protective counterforce, which sent a tremor all the way into my inner organs. I knew that he must’ve had no other choice, and had to use this divine art to protect from the Fists of Seven Damages. I have long heard that Shaolin’s ‘Diamond Armor Invincible Body’ is one of the five top divine arts in history. It certainly lived up to its reputation. Then I unleashed my fifth punch, purposely made it carry more soft-yin force. Once again he stepped forward, and I had to spend a long time neutralizing the counterforce from his body.”

Wuji said, “Godfather, this old monk promised not to fight back. So why did he still try to hurt you by countering your punches?”

Xie Xun rubbed his hair, said, "After my fifth punch, Reverend Kong Jian said, "I never expected the Fists of Seven Damages to be so powerful. If I don't use my inner power to counter your punches, I could not remain injury-free.' I said, 'I am already grateful that you have not tried to hit me.' Immediately afterwards, I sent out the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth punches in one swift motion. Reverend Kong Jian really is amazing. He countered each and every one of those punches, using just the right blend of yin and yang for his counter.

"Shocked at his ability, I yelled, 'Watch out!' and the tenth punch floated out lightly. He nodded, and before my punch reached his body, stepped forward two steps. At this moment, he actually gained the initiative."

Wuji obviously did not know the importance of these two steps. But Zhang CuiShan realized that when experts exchange blows, it is very difficult for one person to anticipate an opponent's attack before it comes out. The ability to do so, even for one move, could very well mean a victory. He nodded, said, "Incredible, incredible!"

Xie Xun continued, "I used all of my power in this tenth punch. Yet when he stepped up and shocked me, I had to back off a couple of steps. Although I couldn't see my own expression, one can easily imagine just how pale I was. Reverend Kong Jian sighed, said, 'Don't be too hasty with your eleventh punch. Recover your strength first.' Despite my combative nature, I had to follow his advice, for I really lacked the energy for another punch."

Zhang CuiShan and his family all worried for Xie Xun at this moment. Wuji suddenly said, "Godfather, I think you should just give up on the last three punches." Xie said, "Why?"

Wuji said, "This old monk is a really good person. You would feel guilty if you hurt him. If you end up hurting yourself, that would be bad too." Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu glanced at each other, surprised that their child could have such insight at his young age. Zhang CuiShan rejoiced at Wuji's compassionate nature, and his ability to comprehend good and evil.

Only to hear Xie Xun let out another sigh, said, "I can't believe that at the time, I didn't even have the sense of a child. My heart was filled with revenge, and would not give up until I find my master. I knew one of us would end up either dead or seriously injured, but it didn't matter at the time. Once I regained my energy, the eleventh punch shot out. This time he stepped up sideways, and met my punch with his waist. His eyebrows rose up, as if in quite a bit of pain. I knew his reason for this. It would hurt me too much should he counter at the chest. But the force exerted by his waist is much smaller, but this way, the force he had to absorb increased a great deal too.

"I froze for a moment, said, 'Considering my master's terrible sins, why do you insist on helping him?' Reverend Kong Jian adjusted his breathing, said with a bitter smile, 'I just want to take two more punches from you, and resolve this issue.' At this moment, a thought suddenly came to me, 'Looks like he can't speak when using Diamond Armor Invincible Body. Why don't I trick him into talking, and punch him at that time?' So I said, 'If I do manage hurt you in thirteen punches, would my master really come out?' He said, 'He personally told me that...' Before he finished speaking, I immediately punched his waist. This punch came very fast, and toward a low point on his body, so he won't have time to raise his protective divine art.

"Who'd have thought that his protection raises by the will of

the heart. When my punch landed, his protective armor had spread throughout his body. I felt my head spinning around, my organs splitting apart, and unwillingly retreated seven or eight steps. My retreat only stopped upon hitting a tree.

“At this moment of such utter defeat, my heart sank, said, ‘I give up. Looks like there is no way for me to get my revenge now. So what is the need for me to remain in this world?’ I raised my hand, aimed it on my forehead, about to push it down.” Yin SuSu yelled, “What an ingenious idea!” Zhang CuiShan asked, “Why so?” but then instantly understood, and said, “But, to do this to such a venerable reverend, isn’t that too cruel?” He also figured out that should Xie Xun tried to commit suicide, Kong Jian would obviously try to stop it. Xie Xun could take advantage of this, and attack right when Kong Jian is saving him. Zhang CuiShan’s cleverness does not take a backseat to his wife. He just never thinks about devious things, and therefore takes longer to realize such things.

Xie Xun said sadly, “I was indeed using his kindness against him. You both guessed correctly. But it was a dangerous gambit. If this palm came down too slowly, he would see through the ruse, and refuse to help me. I had only one punch left. How could I possibly break his invincible armor? If so, then I would simply have to forget all about vengeance. At that moment, I really did use all my palm power. Had he not interfered, I would have killed myself. Of course, I wanted to die anyway should revenge no longer be a possibility.

“When Reverend Kong Jian saw my abnormal actions, he yelled, ‘Hold on! There’s no need to...’ and flew toward me. His left hand reached out immediately to block my right palm. My left fist came out at the same moment. Pang! It hit him directly in the chest. He was indeed defenseless at the moment. I doubt he even gave applying the armor a passing

thought. How could he possibly withstand my punch like this? Immediately his inner organs crumbled, and he fell down onto the ground.

“After this punch, upon realization of his certain death, I suddenly found my conscience. I came to his side and began crying, yelled, ‘Reverend Kong Jian, I am such an ungrateful ingrate. I don’t deserve to be human!’”

Zhang CuiShan and his family sighed. They all felt that he was terribly wrong to kill the reverend in such a despicable manner.

Xie Xun said, “When Reverend Kong Jian saw me cry, he smiled, and try to calm me down, ‘Who on this world does not die? Why are you so sad? Your master will soon come. Try to compose yourself.’ With his reminder, I realized that I must prepare for my enemy instead of agonizing. So I immediately started to mediate, to recover my strength. Yet after a long time, my master still did not come. Surprised, I looked at Reverend Kong Jian.

“With what little life he had left, Reverend Kong Jian said, ‘I... I cannot believe that he... he failed to keep his promise... could someone have... have blocked his path?’ I yelled angrily, ‘You tricked me. You tricked me into killing you, for my master still haven’t came out to see me.’ He shook his head, said, ‘I did not trick you, but I have wronged you.’ In my rage, I wanted to keep yelling at him. But then I thought, ‘Why would he want to trick me into killing him? Plus, in response to killing him, he only tried to apologize.’ Feeling incredibly ashamed, I kneeled in front of him and said, ‘Reverend, if you have any wishes, I will carry them out for you.’ He smiled slightly, said, ‘Hopefully, whenever you wish to kill someone, please remember me.’

“This reverend not only have unparalleled martial arts ability,

but also great wisdom. He knew that I would not give up on revenge, and therefore did not bother to request it. He only wanted me think of him when I wish to kill. Fifth brother. Remember when we matched palms on the boat? The reason I didn't kill you was because I remembered Reverend Kong Jian."

Zhang CuiShan never imagined that Reverend Kong Jian saved his life. His respect for this reverend grew even more.

Xie Xun sighed again, said, "His heartbeat became slower and slower. I put my palm on his 'Ling Ti Pressure Point', began infusing my inner power to extend his life. He suddenly took a deep breath, and asked, 'Is your master still not here?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Then he is not going to come.' I said, 'Reverend. Be assured that I will never again kill anyone to make him appear. But even if I have to walk to the end of the world, I will find him.' He said, 'But, you are no match for him. Unless... unless...' At this point, his words became too soft to hear. I put my ear by his mouth, only to hear him say, 'Unless you can find the Dragon Saber, and find... find the secret inside...' At this moment, he stopped his breathing, and died."

Finally, Zhang and Yin knew why Xie Xun tried so hard to find the secret inside the saber. Why he's normally very courteous, but occasionally gets mad like a wild animal. Why he has such incredible kung fu, yet spends his days in sadness...

Xie Xun said, "Later, I found out the location of the Dragon Saber, and went to Wang Pan Island to take it. Fifth sister, your father was one of my dearest friends. We were the renowned Eagle King and Lion King. Later we became enemies, but that story is long and involves too many other people. I can't tell you about them. Before I took the saber,

my only wish was to find my master. Yet after obtaining the saber, my only fear was that my master might find me. That's why I had to find a deserted island, so I safely find the saber's secret. Afraid that you might reveal my secret, I had to take you along. Who'd have thought that ten years would pass in the blink of an eye, and I have yet to accomplish a single thing!"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Reverend Kong Jian might not have said everything he wanted before death. Perhaps he had something else in mind."

Xie Xun said, "I've thought of every single possibility. No matter how ludicrous. Yet nothing fit. I don't doubt that there's a huge secret within the saber. But I just could not find it."

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After this night's conversation, Xie Xun never touched the subject again. He also became stricter when teaching Wuji martial arts. Wuji is only nine at this moment. Despite his intelligence, there was no way Wuji could learn Xie Xun's powerful martial arts in such a short time. Xie Xun also taught him ways to exchange his pressure points, and how to break free a sealed pressure point. These are some of the deepest martial arts abilities in the world. Wuji didn't even know what pressure points are, plus he has almost no inner power. So how could he learn them? Even so, Xie Xun yelled at him and hit him for mistakes. And he showed no signs of letting up.

Yin SuSu felt dreadful upon seeing the marks on her son. She said to Xie Xun, "Big brother, your kung fu skills are too complicated. How can Wuji learn them all in such a short time? We have all the time in the world on this island. Don't

be so hasty." Xie Xun said, "I'm not teaching him. I'm just asking him to memorize everything." Yin SuSu said in surprise, "You mean, you haven't taught him any kung fu?" Xie Xun said, "It will take too long to teach him step by step. That's why I simply want him to memorize everything."

Yin SuSu didn't understand Xie Xun's reasoning, but trusted him to make the right decision. Whenever her son finished his lessons with injuries, she'd embrace him tenderly. Wuji seemed to be quite understanding of this matter. He said, "Mom, godfather only wanted the best for me. The stricter he is, the more I can remember."

Another several months passed like this. One morning, Xie Xun suddenly said, "Fifth brother, fifth sister, in another four months, the wind will start blowing south. Let's start building a raft now. Zhang CuiShan, happy and surprised, asked, "Do you think we can get back to the mainland this way?" Xie Xun said coldly, "That depends on what the Heaven thinks. As the saying goes, 'Planning depends on man, Success depends on Heaven'. Succeed, and you'll arrive at mainland. Fail, and you'll die in the sea."

There's no reason for him or Yin SuSu to go back. They lived happily here on the island. But Wuji needs to get married and have children. It would be a shame for him to grow old and die alone on this island. When Zhang CuiShan thought of Wuji's future, he happily began to make the raft. The trees on this island are mostly very old. Due to growing in such a cold climate, their trunks are incredibly hard and sturdy. Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan cut down the wood, while Yin SuSu use animal skins to sew a sail. Wuji simply did odd jobs to help out.

Yin SuSu is hardly the spoiled little girl of ten years ago, but she never did have formal sewing training. So it was very

difficult for her to make this sail.

While processing the wood to make the raft, Xie Xun would always have Wuji stand by his side. This way, he could test Wuji's memorization. Of course, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could no longer stay away, so they heard Xie Xun ask questions, while Wuji answers them. Xie Xun wanted Wuji to memorize all sorts of sword techniques, saber techniques and numerous other things. It's already strange that Xie Xun would teach martial arts in a 'scholarly fashion'. Yet he never even tried to explain anything, and taught like a terrible teacher, by simply making his students memorize everything without understanding. Yin SuSu felt sorry for her son. She thought that even a kung fu expert probably can't even memorize this much stuff. Besides, what's the use of memorizing the wording without demonstrations? Surely talking about martial arts isn't worth anything in a true battle. Even worse is that every time Wuji makes a mistake, Xie Xun would slap him on the face. Although Xie Xun didn't apply any inner power to his hand, the slaps would still leave a red mark for half a day.

After two and a half months, they managed to finish the base of the raft. Then they took another half a month to put on the mast. Finally, they began to start to store food and water for the trip. By now, the days were already quite short. Yet the wind still blew northward.

By now, Xie Xun stayed with Wuji every single moment, even forcing Wuji to sleep with him. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could only bitterly smile at Xie Xun's mix of tenderness and sternness.

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One night, Zhang CuiShan woke up from his sleep, found the wind oddly different. He sat up, and realized that the wind

indeed now came from the north. Zhang CuiShan quickly woke up Yin SuSu, said happily, "Listen to the wind!" Before Yin SuSu could respond, they suddenly heard Xie Xun yelled outside, "The northern wind's blowing!" His voice was mixed with tears, which sounded very odd.

The next morning, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu quickly gathered everything for the journey. Part of them didn't want to leave. After all, they had lived here for ten years. Zhang and Yin finished putting food and water on the boat by noon. They then pushed the raft into the sea. Wuji first jumped onboard, and Yin SuSu followed.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed Xie Xun's hand and said, "Big brother, the raft is about six feet from us. Let's jump on together!"

Xie Xun said, "Fifth brother, we shall part here. Please take good care of yourself."

Zhang CuiShan's heart jumped, as if someone had just punched him in the chest. He said, "You... you..." Xie Xun said, "You have a good heart, and should have a good life. But your views on good and evil are too idealistic, and therefore must be careful. Wuji is open-minded and tolerant, so I trust him to make good decisions when he grows up. Although fifth sister is a woman, she will never get the short end of the stick on things. Quite frankly, the person I fear for the most, is you." Zhang CuiShan felt shocked. He yelled, "Big brother, what are you saying? You're not going to... going to come with us?" Xie Xun said, "I said this a few years ago. Don't you remember?"

To Zhang CuiShan, these words felt like thunder roaring in his ears. He did remember Xie Xun's words about remaining on the island. At the time, neither he nor Yin SuSu thought

much of it. Afterwards, Xie Xun never repeated this sentiment. So these came as quite a shock to him. Zhang CuiShan said in a hurry, "Big brother, what's so great about staying on this island alone? Jump on the raft, quick!" As he spoke, Zhang CuiShan pulled on Xie Xun's hand. But Xie Xun remained at his spot firmly.

Zhang CuiShan yelled, "SuSu, Wuji, get back! Big brother said that he wouldn't go with us." Yin SuSu and Wuji both gasped, and jumped back to shore. Wuji said, "Godfather, why won't you go with us? If you don't go, then I won't go either."

Of course, Xie Xun didn't want to leave them. After parting, they certainly would not return. To live alone on this island is possibly worse than death. But after becoming a sworn brother to Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, he cared more for them than himself. And he loved Wuji as his own son. However, after thinking thoroughly, he knew that he had to stay. There are too many enemies back in the mainland. Plus, it's quite possible that people knew that the Dragon Saber is in his hands now. Should he go back, just about everyone in the martial world would want his life. In the past, he would just shrug off the danger. But with both eyes blinded, he can't possibly hold off his enemies. Besides, Zhang and Yin would certainly not see him die alone, and might fight with him to the end. He concluded that they would probably not live for more than a year back in mainland. Of course, Xie Xun didn't care to share this. He would just go ahead and decided stay at the last moment.

When he heard Wuji's words, Xie Xun picked him up and said, "Wuji, you're a good kid. Listen to your godfather, ok? Your godfather's too old, and he is blind. I can live a carefree life here. But would feel uncomfortable living on the mainland." Wuji said, "Don't worry, I'll will take care of you

after we get back, and never leave your side. If you want to eat or drink, I'll bring them to you. So you can live the same life." Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No. I would still be happier here." Wuji said, "I'm happy here too. Mom, dad, let's just stay here, ok?"

Yin SuSu said, "Big brother, why are you so adamant on staying? If there's a problem, share it with us. But we can't let you stay alone."

Xie Xun thought, "Looks like it's impossible to reason with them into leaving. So what should I do?"

Zhang CuiShan suddenly said, "I know you're afraid of your enemies, right? We can just find an obscure place to settle down, so they won't find us. Actually, we can simply go to Wu Dang Mountain. No one would expect you to be there." Xie Xun said, "Humph. Although your big brother is useless, but at least he doesn't need your master's protection." Zhang CuiShan knew he spoke the wrong words, and hurried said, "Big brother's kung fu is my master's equal. Why would you need his protection? Besides, we can go anywhere. There are many places for us to settle."

Xie Xun said, "If you want me to find an obscure place to live, what could be more obscure than this island? Look, are you three going or not?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "If big brother won't leave, neither will we." Xie Xun sighed, said, "Fine. We'll all stay. You can wait till I die, and then leave." Zhang CuiShan said, "Alright. We've already lived here for ten years. And are certainly not in a hurry to leave."

Xie Xun yelled, "Are you certain that you'll leave after I die?" At this moment, the three of them saw Xie Xun's hand flashed, as he unsheathed the Dragon Saber, and sliced at

his own throat.

Zhang CuiShan yelled in shock, "Don't hurt Wuji!" He knew that he could not physically his brother from committing suicide. The only way to stop him is by this lie. Xie Xun immediately froze, put down his saber and yelled, "What?"

Zhang CuiShan realized that he can't change Xie Xun's mind, and said with tears, "If big brother's so adamant about it, then I will respect your wishes, and part." As he spoke, Zhang CuiShan knelt down and kowtowed several times. But Wuji yelled, "Godfather, if you don't go, then neither will I! If you can commit suicide, so can I. A man of his words does what he says. I can slash my own throat too."

Xie Xun yelled, "Little fool. Don't be ridiculous!" He instantly grabbed Wuji, and threw him onto the raft. Xie Xun then stepped up, and pushed both Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan onto the boat also. He yelled, "Fifth brother, fifth sister, Wuji! I wish you a safe journey. Hopefully, you will peacefully return to the mainland." Then he added, "Wuji, after you get back to the mainland, you must call yourself Zhang Wuji. Only keep the name 'Xie Wuji' in your heart, never to be spoken."

Wuji yelled as loud as he could, "Godfather, Godfather!"

Xie Xun raised his saber and said, "If you dare return to shore, our relationship ends immediately."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu knew that their sworn brother's mind is set. They could therefore only wave goodbye. By this time, the wind had begun to carry them away from the island. They saw Xie Xun's body becoming smaller and smaller, until he disappeared into the distance. Only then did

the family of three turn around. Wuji rested in his mother's embrace, cried for a long time, before falling asleep.

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The raft drifted in the sea, where the northern wind continuously carried them southward. None of them knew exactly where they are, but since the sun kept rising from the left, sets on the right, the North Star always behind them, and the raft kept moving. They knew that the mainland is closer with each passing day. Afraid that they might run into icebergs, Zhang CuiShan had only a small portion of the sail up. Although this made the journey longer, but also made it much safer. They still rarely bump into icebergs, but always just a light graze, before slipping away. After they left the region of icebergs, the sails went up fully.

The wind direction never changed. And thankfully, they encountered no storms. Everyone was optimistic about reaching the mainland. Not wishing to make Wuji upset, Zhang and Yin never brought up Xie Xun.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "It's uncertain just how useful big brother's teachings are. So when Wuji returns, he still must enter the Wu Dang Sect." With nothing to do on the raft, Zhang CuiShan began to teach his son basic Wu Dang martial arts. He taught in a much more detailed manner than Xie Xun, and rudimentary Wu Dang martial arts are quite simple. Wuji learned them quickly. For much of the journey, father and son spent their time on the raft practicing techniques.

When Yin SuSu saw the wind continuously blowing southward, she couldn't help but say, "Big brother's knowledge of nature is also incredible. He certainly is a genius."

Wuji suddenly said, "If the wind blows southward half the year, and northward half the year, then we can go back to visit godfather next year." Zhang CuiShan said happily, "You are right. When you grow up, let's go back north together..."

Yin SuSu suddenly pointed southward and yelled, "What's that?" Only to see two black dots in the distance. Zhang CuiShan gasped. He said, "Could they be whales? If they ram into the raft, we're goners." Yin SuSu stared for a while, then said, "Not whales. I didn't see water coming out." The three of them stared at the dots intently. More than hours later, Zhang CuiShan suddenly yelled, "They're boats! Boats!" He immediately stood up, and did a cartwheel on the raft. After Wuji was born, Zhang CuiShan had never acted so silly like this. Wuji laughed out loud, and did two flips himself.

After another couple of hours, they saw the boats clearly. Yin SuSu's body suddenly trembled, and her face turned pale. Wuji asked, "Mother, what's going on?" Yin SuSu's mouth moved, but did not speak aloud. Zhang CuiShan grabbed her hand, his face filled with concern. Yin SuSu sighed and said, "What a coincidence, just when we came back." Zhang CuiShan asked, "What do you mean?" Yin SuSu said, "Look at that mast."

Zhang CuiShan looked at the ships closely. Only to see a large, black eagle drawn on the left ship's mast. He suddenly remembered the Heavenly Eagle Sect's flag on Wang Pan Island, and said, "Is it... the Heavenly Eagle Sect?" Yin SuSu whispered, "Yes. It's my dad's ship."

In this instant, thousands of thoughts passed through Zhang CuiShan's mind. "SuSu's father is the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect. This sect does so many evil deeds. What should I do upon seeing my father-in-law? What would my master

think of my marriage?" He felt Yin SuSu's hands shake, realized that she must also be pondering a lot things at this instant. He said, "SuSu, look at how old our son is already. 'In Heaven or Hell, never to part'. What are you afraid of?" Yin SuSu let out a long sigh, smiled, and whispered, "Hopefully there won't be any problems on my behalf. Just do what's best for Wuji."

Wuji has never seen a boat before. He stared at them curiosity, and didn't hear his parents' words.

As the raft drifted closer, they saw that the two boats are next to each other, as if they're together. Unless they changed their course, the raft would pass about thirty meters to the right of the boats.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Do you want hail them. Maybe we can find out about your dad." Yin SuSu said, "No. Let's get back to the mainland first. Then I'll take you and Wuji to see my dad." Zhang CuiShan said, "That's fine too." Suddenly, swords glittered on the boats, as four or five people were fighting. So he added, "There's fighting on the ships." Yin SuSu looked for a while, and was concerned. She said, "I wonder if my dad's there." Zhang CuiShan said, "Since we're here, we might as well take a look." He changed the raft's direction, so it now drifted towards the ships.

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The raft drifted very slowly, so it still took them a long time to get close.

Suddenly, someone on the Heavenly Eagle Sect's boat yelled, "We're just doing normal business here. Outsiders should mind their own business." Yin SuSu yelled, "Sun and Moon shines down, Heavenly Eagle spreads its wings, Holy

fire rises up, Brings blessings down to us. I am a Hall Leader. May I ask which branch is burning incense and lighting fire?" A man on the boat immediately said courteously, "On this boat are Heavenly City Hall's Leader Li, leading Green Dragon Branch's Leader Cheng and Divine Snake Branch's Leader Feng. Is the Heaven's Secret Hall's Leader Yin here?" Yin SuSu said, "I am Purple Secret Hall's leader."

The people on the boat became chaotic upon hearing these words. Soon, many people shouted, "Hey, Miss Yin's back, Miss Yin's back."

Although Zhang CuiShan married Yin SuSu for ten years, she had never talked about the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Only now did he realize that she is Purple Secret Hall's hall leader. Looks like a 'hall leader' is more powerful than a 'branch leader'. He already saw the abilities of branch leaders Bai and Chang, and knew their skills to be above Yin SuSu's. He figured that she's only hall leader because her father is the sect leader. Zhang CuiShan also reckoned that this 'Heavenly City Hall' Hall Leader Li must be a powerful person.

Only to hear an old voice say, "Looks like my sect leader's daughter have come back. Why don't we call a truce for now?" Another loud, crisp voice said, "Fine! Everyone stop fighting." The sounds of weapons clashing immediately stopped, and the combatants backed off. Zhang CuiShan thought that crisp voice sounded familiar. He yelled, "Are you Brother Yu LianZhou?" That person on the boat yelled, "I am indeed Yu LianZhou. Who... oh... you... you..."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Your little brother Zhang CuiShan!" The raft is still several tens of meters from the boats. But in his excitement, Zhang CuiShan picked up a wood from the raft, threw it into the water, and used it to jump onto the boat.

Yu LianZhou quickly came to greet him. After ten years of separation, with Zhang CuiShan's fate unknown, one could expect their exhilaration upon being reunited. Their four hands grasped each other. One yelled, "Second brother!" One yelled, "Fifth brother!" Their eyes filled with tears, as no more words could come out.

Meanwhile, the Heavenly Eagle Sect held their welcome celebration for Yin SuSu. Eight horns blew loudly in the back, while Hall Leader Li stood in the front. The two branch leaders, Feng and Cheng, stood directly behind him, with the others further back. They now prepared some boards to connect onto the raft, with several people holding on to them using long hooks. Yin SuSu and Wuji jumped onto the boat.

The Heavenly Eagle Sect divides into three inner halls and five outer branches. Each division has their own people. The three inner halls divide into Heaven's Secret, Purple Secret, and Heavenly City halls. The five outer branches divide into Green Dragon, White Tiger, Black Valiant, Red Sparrow, and Divine Serpent branches. Yin TianZheng's eldest son, Yin YeWang, heads the Heaven's Secret Hall. Yin SuSu heads the Purple Secret Hall. Yin TianZheng's little martial brother Li TianYuan heads the Heavenly City Hall.

Seeing Yin SuSu dressed in such strange clothing, holding a kid with her, Li TianYuan froze for a moment. Then a smile came to his face, as he said, "Thank heavens you've come back. You have no idea how worried your father had been these ten years."

Yin SuSu got on her knees and bowed, said, "Nice to see you, martial uncle." Then she said to Wuji, "Hurry and kowtow to your martial granduncle." Wuji quickly got on his knees and kowtowed several times. Meanwhile, his eyes stared at Li

TianYuan, quite curious to see all these people on the boat.

Yin SuSu got back up and said, "Martial uncle, this is your niece's son. He's called Wuji."

Li TianYuan stuttered a bit, and then started to laugh loudly, said, "Great! Great! Your father will be so delighted. Not only is his daughter back, but he also gained such a handsome little grandson."

Yin SuSu saw several dead people on the deck, and asked quietly, "Who are we fighting? What's the reason?" Li TianYuan said, "They are members of Wu Dang and Kun Lun sects." When Yin SuSu heard her husband yell 'Brother Yu', and then met up with someone on the other boat, she knew Wu Dang's involved. So she said, "Try to resolve this peacefully if possible."

Li TianYuan said, "Yes." Although he's the martial uncle, his rank is below Yin SuSu's. Hence, on official sect matters, Yin SuSu has power over him.

Only to hear Zhang CuiShan yell, "SuSu, Wuji, come see my martial brother." Yin SuSu grabbed Wuji's hand, and walked over to the other boat. Li TianYuan was afraid for her safety, and followed.

Only to see eight people on the other boat. A tall, skinny man of about forty is holding hands with Zhang CuiShan, showing a close relationship. Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu, this is second brother Yu I always tell you about. Second brother, this is your sister-in-law and your nephew Wuji." Yu LianZhou and Li TianYuan were incredibly shocked to hear these words. The Heavenly Eagle Sect and Wu Dang are in the midst of fighting, yet an important person from each sect is actually a couple. Not only that, they even have a child.

Yu LianZhou knew that it's impossible to tell the whole story at this time. So he went ahead and introduced everyone first.

He introduced a short, chubby Taoist with a yellow hat as Kun Lun's XiHua Zi. A middle-aged woman is XiHua Zi's martial sister, Wei SiNiang*. People in the martial world call her 'Lightning Madame' behind her back. Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu had heard of these two people. The others are also expert swordsman from Kun Lun Sect, but not as famous as XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang. Although XiHua Zi's fairly old, he seemed to lack manners. His first words were, "Fifth Hero Zhang, where's that bastard Xie Xun? You should know, right?"

Note* 'Si' means 'four'. 'Niang' means 'Madame', except it's not as formal. So SiNiang is not her given name.

Zhang CuiShan hasn't even set foot on the mainland, and already two huge dilemmas are presented to him. First, Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are enemies. Second, people are already asking about Xie Xun. He didn't know how to respond, and asked Yu LianZhou, "Second brother, what's going on here?"

When Zhang CuiShan didn't respond to his question, XiHua Zi became furious. He yelled, "Did you hear my question? Where's Xie Xun?" He ranks quite high in the Kun Lun Sect, and has very good kung fu. So XiHua Zi is used to ordering people around.

Two of Branch Leader Feng's men just died in XiHua Zi's hands. So he's already angry with XiHua Zi, said coldly, "Fifth Hero Zhang is my sect leader's son-in-law. You might want to watch your mouth when speaking." XiHua Zi yelled, "How could a demonic woman of an evil sect be married to a

member of a righteous sect? There must be something suspicious behind it.” Branch Leader Feng chuckled, said, “Sect Leader Yin already has a grandson, and yet you still spew this sort of crap?” XiHua Zi yelled, “This demonic woman...”

Wei SiNiang knew of Branch Leader Feng’s intentions. He wanted to separate the bond between Kun Lun and Wu Dang. At the same time, he also gets to please Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu. Things can only get worse should XiHua Zi keep talking. So she quickly cut in, “Martial brother, no need to waste time arguing. Let’s hear what Second Hero Yu has to say.”

Yu LianZhou looked at Zhang CuiShan, then at Yin SuSu. He didn’t know what to think either, and therefore said, “Let’s get into the cabin to discuss this matter. Also, we can use this time to heal the injured.”

On this boat, the Heavenly Eagle Sect is guest. And the highest ranked member of the Heavenly Eagle Sect is Yin SuSu. She entered the cabin first with Wuji, with Li TianYuan following.

When Branch Leader Feng entered the cabin, he felt a strong wind coming towards his waist. Branch Leader Feng is very experienced, knew immediately that XiHua Zi ambushed him. Instead of blocking, he simply dashed forward, while yelling, “Huh? Are you attacking me?” He evaded XiHua Zi’s ‘Triple Lunar Hand’, and with the yell turned all attention towards them.

Wei SiNiang glared at XiHua Zi, only to see his face all red. It was agreed that the Heavenly Eagle Sect members are guests on this boat. So XiHua Zi’s actions, especially as a member of a righteous sect, is quite shameful. Everyone sat

down in the cabin, separating into two groups, guests and hosts.

Yin SuSu is the head of the guests, and sat in the front with Wuji. On the host side, Yu LianZhou led the group. He asked Wei SiNiang to bring an extra chair, then said, "Fifth brother, sit here." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes" and sat down.

This separated Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, and put them into two different camps.

For the past ten years, Yu DaiYan never left due to his injury. Zhang CuiShan disappeared, his fate unknown. Yet the remaining five heroes became even more famous. Although Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou are second-generation disciples, their position in the martial world rivals even the reverends at Shaolin. Therefore, out of respect for the Five Heroes of Wu Dang, the Kun Lun participants offered Yu LianZhou the front seat.

Yu LianZhou thought, "Looks like during the ten years fifth brother disappeared, he married Heavenly Eagle Sect's Leader Yin's daughter. I'm sure there are a lot of details involved. He might not want to disclose everything to the public." So he said, "Including Shaolin, Kun Lun, E Mei, Kong Dong, Wu Dang five major sects, Divine Fist, Five Winded Saber, and seven other minor sects, Sea Sand, Huge Whale, and five other clans, a total of twenty-one groups wanted to find the location of 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun, Heavenly Eagle Sect's Miss Yin, and my own sect's martial brother Zhang CuiShan. We had some misunderstanding with the Heavenly Eagle Sect in the process, and ended up as enemies. This had been going on for ten years now..." He paused for a moment, then added, "Thankfully, Miss Yin and Brother Zhang both have appeared, so we can clear up our misunderstanding. However, it will take a long time to

discuss the details. So I propose that we return to land first. Let Miss Yin first see her sect leader, my martial brother see his master, and then have everyone meet to discuss things peacefully. Hopefully, we can then resolve this issue..."

XiHua Zi suddenly cut in, "Where is that bastard Xie Xun? We want the location of that bastard."

Zhang CuiShan felt uneasy after hearing about all these conflicts, knowing that he's partially responsible for them. He also didn't know how to respond to XiHua Zi's question. If he tells the truth, countless people will go to Fire-Ice Island for revenge. But to not say anything would bring about suspicions on his family. Yin SuSu suddenly said, "The vicious, murderous Xie Xun died nine years ago."

Yu LianZhou, XiHua Zi, Wei SiNiang, and everyone else all let out a gasp, "Xie Xun's dead?"

Yin SuSu said, "That day I was giving birth. Xie Xun's insanity acted up. Just as he was about to kill fifth brother and I, my son began to cry. This murderous, vicious Xie Xun developed a heart problem, and died.

Zhang CuiShan realized what Yin SuSu's trying to say. She didn't lie, as the 'vicious, murderous' Xie Xun did indeed 'die' that day. The 'good' Xie Xun remained.

XiHua Zi let out a humph. Since Yin SuSu's a demonic woman in his mind, her words could not be trusted. He asked loudly, "Fifth Hero Zhang, is Xie Xun really dead?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, that murderous Xie Xun really did die that day."

Wuji heard the whole conversation and was quite upset.

Although he's very intelligent, Wuji doesn't know anything about the ways of the world. Xie Xun treated him like his own son, yet these people are cursing him, and even his own parents say that he's dead. Wuji couldn't help but cry out, "Godfather's not vicious. He's not dead." These words stunned everyone in the cabin.

In her rage, Yin SuSu slapped Wuji across the face, yelled, "Close your mouth!" Wuji cried, "Mom, why do you say that godfather's dead? Isn't he still alive?" He's only lived with three other people all his life, and had never touched upon the evils of the society. Even a boy of average intelligence, growing up in the martial world, would know that lying is normal, and not make such a huge blunder. Yin SuSu scolded, "When adults are talking, a child should not cut in. We are talking about that vicious, murderous Xie Xun, not your godfather." Wuji didn't understand, but stopped speaking nonetheless.

XiHua Zie laughed coldly, said, "Little brother, Xie Xun's your godfather, right? Where is he?"

Wuji saw the grave expressions on his parents' face, and knew that they are in a middle of an important discussion. When XiHua Zi asked his question, he shook his head, and said, "I won't tell you." The words "I won't tell you" further proved that Xie Xun is still alive.

XiHua Zi stared at Zhang CuiShan and said, "Fifth Hero Zhang, is this Miss Yin really your wife?" Zhang CuiShan didn't expect such question, and said, "Yes. She is my wife." XiHua Zia said, "Your wife injured two disciples of my Kun Lun Sect. They've now become half-dead, half-retarded people. How do we resolve this issue?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped. Yin SuSu yelled, "That is nonsense!" Zhang CuiShan said, "There must be

some misunderstanding here. My wife and I have been away from the mainland for ten years now. How could we have injured your sect's disciples? XiHua Zi said, "Then what about ten years ago? It's been ten years since Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao were injured." Yin SuSu said, "Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao?" XiHua Zi said, "Does Mrs. Zhang still remember them? Perhaps you've killed too many people in your life, and couldn't remember all of them." Yin SuSu said, "What happened to them? Why do you accuse me for their deaths?"

XiHua Zi let out a laugh, then said, "Accuse you? Ha! Although Gao and Jiang are now retarded, they still remember one thing, and could say one name, to tell us who injured them. That name is "Yin... Su... Su..." He said this in a very venomous tone, as if he'd kill Yin SuSu immediately if given the chance.

Branch Leader Feng suddenly cut in, "How can you, an old Taoist, speak the given name of my sect's hall leader? You don't even adhere to your own Taoist rules, yet still pretend to be some elder in the martial world? Brother Cheng, do you think there's anything more despicable than this?" Branch Leader Cheng said, "No. It's a shame that a righteous sect could teach such an undisciplined disciple."

XiHua Zi yelled madly, "Are you talking about me? You dare ridicule me?"

Branch Leader Feng didn't even bother to look at him. He said, "Brother Cheng, even if someone learns some simple sword techniques, he should still speak like a human, right?" Branch Leader Cheng said, "After the passing of Taoist Ling Bao, Kun Lun Sect has become worse and worse with each generation."

Taoist Ling Bao is XiHua Zi's martial grandfather, very respected in the martial world. XiHua Zi knew he needed to choose his answer carefully. Otherwise, he might end up saying that he's more respected than the venerable martial grandfather. XiHua Zi quickly stepped to the cabin entrance. Swoosh, his sword came out, and yelled, "Evil sect's demons. If you got the guts, come out and fight!"

Branch Leaders Feng and Cheng purposely enraged XiHua Zi to help out Yin SuSu. They thought that since Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu are now married, Wu Dang would surely no longer be their enemy. Even if they don't help the Heavenly Eagle Sect, Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan would at least stay neutral. The Heavenly Eagle Sect can easily take care of these Kun Lun folks.

Wei SiNiang frowned. She also knew that there was no way the Kun Lun disciples here alone could defeat the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Besides, Zhang CuiShan could easily fight on the other side. She said, "Martial brother, don't be so rash. They are our guests. Let's follow Second Hero Yu's orders." She purposely brought up Yu LianZhou, thinking that considering Yu LianZhou's fame, he would certainly stay on their side. But XiHua Zi did not understand her intentions, and yelled, "Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are now relatives by marriage. He's on their side now, so why should I listen to him?"

Yu LianZhou rarely displays any expression on his face. And upon hearing XiHua Zi's word, he simply remained silent.

Wei SiNiang said in a hurry, "Martial brother, how can you say such a thing? Wu Dang and Kun Lun had been working together for the past ten years. Who doesn't respect and know the fame of Second Hero Yu? We can trust Wu Dang's Five Heroes to be objective." XiHua Zi let out a humph, said,

"I wouldn't be so sure!" Wei SiNiang screamed madly inside at XiHua Zi, for being such a fool. She said, "Martial brother. Why do you insist on offending the Wu Dang's Five Heroes? Don't blame me if master reprimand you for this." She kept on saying 'Wu Dang's Five Heroes', obviously excluding Zhang CuiShan. XiHua Zi really did stop yelling upon hearing about his master.

Yu LianZhou said calmly, "This issue concerns most of the major sects and clans in the martial world. Surely I cannot make a major decision alone. Since we've waited for ten years already, another year or two won't matter. I'll take my martial brother back to Wu Dang, so my master can decide on what to do."

XiHua Zi said with a smirk, "What a great defensive 'Close Off by Enveloping' by Second Hero Yu."

Yu LianZhou almost never gets mad. But this 'Lock Away by Enveloping' is a famous protective Wu Dang technique. To speak of it in such a manner meant ridiculing his master. But then Yu LianZhou thought, "I can't be too rash on handling this matter, or the results might be disastrous. No need to argue with this wild Taoist."

After speaking, XiHua Zi saw Yu LianZhou's eyes glowed like lightning for a moment, and shuddered. XiHua Zi thought, "My master and sect leader martial uncle are the two best fighters of Kun Lun. Yet the expression in their eyes could not match the deadliness of this person." Yu LianZhou's expression calmed, and said, "If brother XiHua has a good suggestion, I'd like to hear it." XiHua Zi turned to Wei SiNiang and said, "Martial sister, what do you think? Should we just forget about Gao and Jiang?"

Before Wei SiNiang could respond, sound of horn came from

outside. A Kun Lun disciple came in and said, "E Mei and Kong Dong sects are here." XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang were overjoyed. Wei SiNiang said, "Second Hero Yu, why don't we hear what Kong Dong and E Mei has to say?" Yu LianZhou said, "Fine."

Li TianYuan and Branch Leader Cheng glanced at each other. Both frowned.

Zhang CuiShan became more troubled. He didn't mind E Mei too much, but Xie Xun is Kong Dong Sect's major enemy. He had once injured three elders of Kong Dong, plus stole their . No wonder Kong Dong Sect wanted Xie Xun's location."

Yin SuSu contemplated about the same things. She thought that everything would be easier had Wuji not interfered. But since Wuji had never lied before, and loved his godfather dearly, his reaction was perfectly normal. Upon seeing his red cheek from her slap, Yin SuSu felt bad for being so harsh. She embraced him in her arms. Wuji is still quite scared. He whispered into his mother's ear, "Mom, godfather's not dead, right?" Yin SuSu whispered into his ear, "Of course not. Your mother was lying to them. These are all bad people. They want to hurt your godfather." Wuji immediately realized what's going on. He glared at everyone in front of him, and thought, "Oh, so you are all bad people. You want to hurt my godfather."

From this day on, Zhang Wuji truly entered the martial world. He began to realize just how devious humans could be. He also knew that although his mother slapped him, the real culprits are these people in front of him. Living under the love of his family, he had never really understood the concept of a 'bad person'. Even though Xie Xun told him about Cheng Kun, the idea still never really registered in his mind until now, when he's actually facing one.

End of Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 - Eternal Delight as the Seven Heroes Reunited

(Translated by Meh)



At this moment, he felt the plank giving away below his feet, as it was cut in two. He tried to jump up, but as he was right in between two boats, there was nothing to hang on to. With only the deep, blue sea under him, Splash! XiHua Zi fell into the water.

After a long time, Kong Dong and E Mei each had six, seven people enter the cabin. They greeted Yu LianZhou, XiHua Zi, and Wei SiNiang. The Kong Dong group is headed by an old, skinny man. The E Mei group is headed by a middle-aged nun. These two groups were quite surprised to see the Heavenly Eagle Sect people here.

XiHua Zi said loudly, "Hello, venerable Jing Xu, Third Master Tang. Unfortunately, Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect have joined forces." That short, old man is called Tang WenLiang, one of the 'Five Elders of Kong Dong'. The middle-aged nun, Jing Xu, is E Mei fourth generation's eldest disciple. Both are renowned experts in the martial world. They couldn't believe what XiHua Zi just said. Jing Xu is a very careful person, knew about XiHua Zi's bad temper, and didn't say anything. However, Tang WenLiang's eyes immediately glared at Yu LianZhou. He said, "Is this true, Second Hero Yu?"

Before Yu LianZhou could respond, XiHua Zi cut in, "Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect are now relatives through marriage. Zhang CuiShan is Yin TianZheng's son-in-law..." Tang WenLiang said with surprise, "You've found the Zhang CuiShan who had disappeared for ten years now?"

Yu LianZhou pointed at Zhang CuiShan and said, "This is my fifth martial brother, Zhang CuiShan. Fifth brother, this is an elder of Kong Dong Sect, Third Master Tang WenLiang." XiHua Zi added, "Zhang CuiShan and his wife know 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun's location. Yet instead of saying it, they

chose to make up a huge lie.”

Tang WenLiang’s turned incredibly angry upon hearing Xie Xun’s name, and yelled, “Where is he?” Zhang CuiShan said, “I must consult with my master on this matter first. So I’m sorry to withhold this information for now.” Tang WenLiang yelled furiously, “Where is this bastard Xie Xun? He killed my nephew. There’s no way I can coexist with him in the same world. Are you going to tell me his location or not?” He spoke in such a deafening voice, without a hint of courtesy.

Yin SuSu said coldly, “You’re just one of the older guys in the Kong Dong Sect. What right do you have to question Fifth Hero Zhang this way? Are you the Martial World’s most venerable? Are you the Head of Wu Dang, Taoist Zhang?”

In his rage, Tang WenLiang was about to attack Yin SuSu. But he held back at the last moment. Yin SuSu was simply a young woman. It would be very rude for an elder like him to attack her in such a manner. So he asked Zhang CuiShan, “Who is she?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “She is my wife.” XiHua Zi added, “And also the daughter of Heavenly Eagle Sect’s Leader Yin. Humph, just a wretched demonic lady of an evil sect.” ‘White-Browed Eagle King’ Yin TianZheng’s kung fu is quite incredible. No one who fought him had lasted more than ten exchanges. So when Tang WenLiang heard that she’s Yin TianZheng’s daughter, he hesitated to speak further, and said, “Good! Good! Absolutely marvelous!”

Jing Xu had been silent ever since entering the room. She chose to speak up at this moment, “Can Second Hero Yu tells us the story behind all this?” Yu LianZhou said, “This is indeed a long story, as it covered events over a ten-year period. How about this, Wu Dang will host a gathering at Wu

Chang city's Yellow Crane Restaurant. We will welcome all heroes who wish to attend. There, the entire story will be told, and we can resolve this issue. Is this ok with everyone here?" Jing Xu nodded, said, "This is fine with me."

Tang WenLiang said, "We can wait to hear the story three months later. But as for Xie Xun's location, I'd like to know now, Fifth Hero Zhang." Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I'm afraid I cannot tell you right now." Although he didn't like the response, Tang WenLiang knew he couldn't offend Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sects. Besides, there's no way Zhang CuiShan can withhold the truth in three months. Without further words, he stood up, waved at his constituents, and said, "Let's meet in three months. Goodbye."

XiHua Zi said, "Third Master Tang, can we hitch a ride back on your boat?" Tang WenLiang said, "Sure." XiHua Zi said to Wei SiNiang, "Martial Sister, let's go!" He came here on the same boat as Yu LianZhou, so this act clearly showed enmity towards Wu Dang. Yu LianZhou did not make a comment, and courteously showed them off the boat. Then he said, "After reporting to our master, we shall send out invitation letters to everyone."

Yin SuSu suddenly said, "Taoist XiHua, I wish to ask you something." XiHua Zi turned his head, said, "What?" Yin SuSu said, "You said that I was a demonic woman of an evil sect. But how am I 'demonic' and 'evil'?" XiHua Zi froze for a moment, then said, "You're a devilish fox who belongs to an infamous evil sect. What's more to say? Otherwise, why would a righteous Fifth Hero Zhang fall for you?" Yin SuSu said, "Thank you for your explanation."

XiHua Zi was surprised that Yin SuSu did not try to rebut. Hearing no further words, he walked over to Kong Dong

Sect's boats on the plank.

Even though the boats are next to each other, it still takes a seven-meter plank to connect the two. By answering Yin SuSu's questions, XiHua Zi walked across last. Just as he walked toward the middle of the plank, sound of wind came from behind, followed by a scraping noise. Despite his temper, XiHua Zi's kung fu is quite formidable, and certainly very experienced. Thinking that someone attacked from behind, he quickly drew his sword. At this moment, he felt the plank giving away below his feet, as it was cut in two. He tried to jump up, but as he was right in between two boats, there was nothing to hang on to. With only the deep, blue sea under him, Splash! XiHua Zi fell into the water.

XiHua Zi didn't know how to swim, and immediately swallowed a large amount of water. His hands waved like mad, when suddenly the hands found a rope. In his joy, XiHua Zi held on to the rope tightly, only to feel a person pulling him up. XiHua Zi looked up, and saw that the person pulling him is actually Branch Leader Cheng, who looked at him in a smug expression.

Yin SuSu really despised XiHua Zi's rudeness, and made this trap for him. Branch Leader Feng's thirty-six flying daggers are renowned in the martial world. He's both fast and accurate. Each dagger was exquisitely made by the best blacksmiths with the best materials. Thin as a feather, astonishingly sharp, so should his opponent try to block with a weapon, that weapon usually breaks in half. When Branch Leader Feng used the dagger cut off the plank, it split apart easily. Branch Leader Cheng prepared a rope at the same time. After XiHua Zi had drunk some seawater, he pulled XiHua Zi up.

When Wei SiNiang, Tang WenLiang, and others saw XiHua Zi

drop into the sea, they knew it was a trap. But Branch Leader Feng was too quick, and they had all been looking the other way. So no one knew exactly what had happened.

As Branch Leader Cheng pulled him up, XiHua Zi held back his anger. He waited to get on the deck first to attack these people. However, after pulling him up a bit above the water, Branch Leader Cheng stopped. He yelled, "Old Taoist, don't move. I'm not all that strong. If you move and I can't hold on, I'd have to release the rope." XiHua Zi didn't want this person to throw himself back into the water again. So he held on to the rope tightly.

Branch Leader Cheng yelled, "Be careful!" He then swung the rope, XiHua Zi's body flew back over twenty meters, then this momentum was used to send him over to the other boat.

XiHua Zi let go of the rope, and landed on the boat's deck. He had just lost his sword to the sea, and was about to go berserk. Only to hear thunderous laughter coming from the Heavenly Eagle Sect's boat. XiHua Zi quickly grabbed Wei SiNiang's sword and was about to go duel with them. But then realized that the two boats are too far apart now. So other than cursing loudly, he couldn't do anything else.

Yu LianZhou saw exactly how Yin SuSu ridiculed XiHua Zi. He felt that this woman is quite cruel, not a good match for fifth brother, and then said, "Hall leaders Yin and Li. Please tell your sect leader that should he have time, we welcome him to the Yellow Crane Restaurant gathering. Now let us part. Fifth brother, are you coming with me to see master?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes."

Yin SuSu knew that Yu LianZhou wanted to separate her and Zhang CuiShan. She looked up at the sky, then down on the deck.

Zhang CuiShan knew what she meant, 'On Heaven or in Hell, never to part'. So he said, "Second brother, how about I take your sister-in-law and nephew to see our master. Then, with his permission, we would then go see my father-in-law. Is that alright?" Yu LianZhou hesitated, but knew that he can't truly separate this family of three, and nodded.

Joyous at his approval, Yin SuSu turned to Li TianYuan, said, "Martial uncle, please send these words to my dad. Tell him his daughter can't visit him right now. I will go back home as soon as I can."

Li TianYuan said, "That's fine, I'll wait surely wait for you. He then stood up, and waved goodbye to Yu LianZhou.

Yin SuSu asked, "How is my father's health?" Li TianYuan said, "Excellent! He's more energetic than ever." Yin SuSu then asked, "How is my brother?" Li TianYuan said, "Also excellent! His kung fu has accelerated greatly these past years. Not even this martial uncle is his match now. Pretty ashamed of myself, really." Yin SuSu smiled, and said, "Oh, you're just joking with me." Li TianYuan said seriously, "Actually, I'm not kidding. Even your father's said that his son would soon surpass himself. Don't you think that's amazing?" Yin SuSu said, "Oh, I can't believe you're gloating like this in front of outsiders. You're not afraid that Second Hero Yu would laugh at you?" Li TianYuan said with a smile, "Fifth Hero Zhang is now our leader's son-in-law. How could Second Hero Yu be an outsider?" As he spoke, Li TianYuan bowed with his fists together, and walked out the cabin.

Yu LianZhou felt quite annoyed upon hearing these last words. He raised his eyebrows, but did not speak.

After the people from the Heavenly Eagle Sect had left, Zhang CuiShan asked in a hurry, "Second brother, what happened to third brother afterwards? Did he...recover?" Yu LianZhou sighed, but did not respond for a long time. Zhang CuiShan waited in suspense. He kept examining Yu LianZhou, afraid that he'd say the word 'died'.

Yu LianZhou then said, "Third brother's still alive. But quite frankly, he's not much different from a dead person. His whole body's permanently crippled. There is no longer a Third Hero Yu in the martial world now."

Zhang CuiShan was happy that Yu DaiYan was alive, but cried at third brother's crippled condition. He then asked, "Have you found out who injured my third brother?"

Yu LianZhou didn't respond. Instead he turned toward Yin SuSu. His eyes glared like lightning, and asked, "Miss Yin, do you know who injured my third brother?" Yin SuSu shuddered and said, "I heard his joints were broken by Shaolin's Golden-Steel Finger." Yu LianZhou said, "That's correct. Do you know who did it?" Yin SuSu shook her head, said, "I don't know."

Yu LianZhou then ignored her, and said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fifth brother, Shaolin said that you killed everyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, including servants and relatives. Plus you killed several Shaolin monks. Is this true?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Well..." Yin SuSu cut in, "This doesn't concern him. I killed all of them."

Yu LianZhou glanced at her, with eyes full of hatred. But after an instant, his expression quickly returned to normal, then said, "I knew fifth brother would never kill mindlessly like that. Because of this matter, Shaolin came to Wu Dang Mountain three times. But since everyone knew fifth brother

disappeared, they can't really do anything. We kept saying that Shaolin injured third brother. They kept saying that fifth brother murdered all those people. Thankfully, the Shaolin Abbot Kong Wen is a cautious person, and quite respectful of our master. He told his disciples not to view us as enemies. So we never had any open conflicts with Shaolin these ten years."

Yin SuSu said, "This is all due to the mistakes of my younger days. But since I've already killed them, let's just not tell them the truth. They can't figure it out anyway."

Yu LianZhou showed an astonished expression, and glanced at Zhang CuiShan. He thought, "How could you marry a woman like this?"

Yin SuSu saw Yu LianZhou's cold expression toward her, including calling her 'Miss Yin' rather than 'sister-in-law'. Frustrated, she said, "I will take responsibility for my own actions. Don't worry, Wu Dang will not get dragged into this. If Shaolin wants revenge, then they can seek my Heavenly Eagle Sect."

Yu LianZhou said, "Nothing in the martial world is above the word 'reason'. Even if we're not dealing with the powerful Shaolin, but rather a lowly farmer, one still cannot be unreasonable."

If this had been ten years ago, Yin SuSu would've drawn her sword in anger. But she heard Zhang CuiShan say, "Second brother's words are quite right," and thought, "Do you think I really care about your righteous crap? I just don't want to burden my husband by arguing with you." She then grabbed Wuji's hands and walked out the deck, said, "Wuji, let me show you around this boat. You've never seen one, right?"

After his wife and son left the cabin, Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, in the past ten years, I..." Yu LianZhou held up his hand, said, "Fifth brother, you and I closer than even blood brothers. No matter what you did, I will stand by your side. As for your wife, there's no need to explain everything. Just tell master everything when we return. Should he truly oppose this marriage, us seven brothers will get on our knees and beg him. After all, even your son's grown up now. Surely master would not separate you and your wife." Exhilarated at these words, Zhang CuiShan said, "Thank you, second brother."

Yu LianZhou is cold on the outside, but warm inside. Among the seven brothers, he is the most stern and jokes the least. Although the younger brothers respect him a great deal, they also fear him much more than their eldest martial brother, Song YuanQiao. In reality, Yu LianZhou's also incredibly caring of his brothers. When Zhang CuiShan disappeared, his heart was broken. But on the surface, he maintained the same, cold expression. Seeing his long, lost brother today is one of the happiest moments of his life. Yet he still carried that cold expression, and even scolded Yin SuSu. Only when alone with his brother, did Yu LianZhou speak his true feelings. He's mostly afraid of one thing, Yin SuSu's murder of those Shaolin disciples. Nonetheless, Yu LianZhou made a promise in his mind. He would protect fifth brother's family with his life.

Zhang CuiShan then asked, "Second brother, how did we become enemies with the Heavenly Eagle Sect? Did my wife and I cause the conflict?" Yu LianZhou did not respond, instead asked, "What exactly happened on Wang Pan Island?"

Zhang CuiShan told the whole story, from going to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, till Xie Xun forced them out to

sea. Then Yu LianZhou inquired about Kun Lun's Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao.

Afterwards, Yu LianZhou pondered for a long time, before saying, "So that's what happened. If you hadn't come back, I doubt we'd ever find the truth." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, my sworn brother... Sigh. Second brother, Xie Xun really isn't as terrible as everyone thinks. He only did so many bad things because of a terrible tragedy. Now, he is my sworn brother." Yu LianZhou nodded, thought, "This is another troubling issue."

Zhang CuiShan continued, "When my sworn brother howled, he turned everyone on the island insane. That way, no one could reveal his secret."

Yu LianZhou said, "Although Xie Xun's actions are very brutal, he is, undoubtedly, a very ingenious person. However, despite his careful planning, Xie Xun forgot one person." Zhang CuiShan asked, "Who?" Yu LianZhou said, "Bai GuiShou."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Heavenly Eagle Sect's Branch Leader Bai?" Yu LianZhou said, "That's correct. You said that his internal power was the best among the people there. He fainted when Xie Xun shot him with the poisonous wine. Had he been awake, I doubt he could've withstood the howl..."

Zhang CuiShan said, "So that's what happened. Bai GuiShou was still unconscious during the howl, so he kept his sanity. My sworn brother never realized this."

Yu LianZhou sighed, said, "It seemed that only Bai GuiShou was able to make it out of Wang Pan Island unscathed. Although Kun Lun inner power is quite strong, Gao and Jiang had only rudimentary knowledge of it. They have since

become mentally retarded. When others ask them who made them this way, Jiang Tao simply shook his head, while Gao ZeCheng kept repeating a single person's name, Yin SuSu." He paused a moment, then added, "Now I know that it's because he couldn't forget sister-in-law. Humph, the next time XiHua Zi utters such nonsense, I'll certainly give him a piece of my mind. Obviously it's the Kun Lun disciples who are unruly, yet he had to blame it on someone else."

Zhang CuiShan said, "If Bai GuiShou was fine, then he should've explained everything." Yu LianZhou said, "But he won't say anything. Do you know why?" Zhang CuiShan thought for a moment, realized the reason, and said, "That's right. The Heavenly Eagle Sect wants the Dragon Saber. They obviously don't want anyone else to know about this." Yu LianZhou said, "That's how the conflict started. Kun Lun Sect kept saying that Yin SuSu destroyed Gao and Jiang. We thought the Heavenly Eagle Sect killed you."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Did Bai GuiShou tell you that I went to Wang Pan Island too?" Yu LianZhou said, "No. He wouldn't say anything. Fourth brother, sixth brother, and I went to Wang Pan Island. We saw you wrote those twenty-four characters. That's how we knew you went to that ceremony. When we couldn't find you on the island, we asked Bai GuiShou. He didn't respond, and instead attacked us. I managed to injure him with my palm. Later on, Kun Lun Sect started sought the Heavenly Eagle Sect out, but lost pretty badly. Then things started to get more and more out of hand.

Zhang CuiShan was quite remorseful. He said, "I feel so awful, knowing my wife and I had caused so much problems in the martial world. After reporting to master, I'll personally apologize to each sect."

Yu LianZhou sighed, said, "Actually, it's just all a coincidence,

rather than your making. Remember that day ten years ago? When master asked seventh brother and I to go protect the Dragon Gate Escort Agency? On the way, we encountered an unjust situation. We just had to stop and take care of the matter. And in the process saved more than ten innocent lives. But by the time we got to Lin An, the murder at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency had already occurred. Actually, you and your wife only caused the hostilities between Wu Dang, Kun Lun against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. But since the Heavenly Eagle Sect wanted the Dragon Saber, they never brought up Xie Xun's name. So Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, and Divine Fist Sect all believed that the Heavenly Eagle Sect killed their leaders. As a result, the Heavenly Eagle Sect developed quite a bad reputation."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Actually, the Dragon Saber is hardly anything remarkable. Why would my father-in-law sacrifice so much for it?"

Yu LianZhou said, "I had never seen your father-in-law. But I do respect his strong, fighting spirit, as he fought off waves of enemies."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin, E Mei, and these other sects did not go to the Wang Pan Island ceremony. How did Heavenly Eagle Sect offend them?" Yu LianZhou said, "This concerns your sworn brother Xie Xun. In order to get the Dragon Saber, the Heavenly Eagle Sect continuously sent ships out to sea, hoping to find Xie Xun. You can't contain a fire by wrapping it with paper. No matter how tight Bai GuiShou's lips, the secret eventually got out. Your sworn brother committed over thirty crimes using 'Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun's name. Countless people in the martial world want him dead. Do you know about this?"

Zhang CuiShan whispered, "They finally figured out that he did it." Yu LianZhou said, "Every time he commits a crime, he'd write 'The murderer is Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun'. At that time, we all investigated into this matter, but couldn't find any leads. Things changed once people knew that Heavenly Eagle Sect is seeking Xie Xun. They remembered that Xie Xun is Cheng Kun's only disciple, and that Xie Xun despised his master. Obviously, the killer framing Cheng Kun is likely Xie Xun. Think about just how many people Xie Xun killed, and how many people it affects. Just the murder of Shaolin's Reverend Kong Jian alone, was enough to make him a very wanted person."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "My sworn brother has changed his ways. But too much blood covers his hands... Second brother, I really don't know what to do."

Yu LianZhou said, "Wu Dang became the Heavenly Eagle Sect's enemy due to you. Kun Lun due to Gao and Jiang. Huge Whale Clan and others due to revenge for their leaders. In addition, countless groups and people, led by Shaolin, sought out the Heavenly Eagle Sect due to Xie Xun. In the past years, there had been five major battles, and countless minor skirmishes. The Heavenly Eagle Sect lost every single major battle, but still hung on despite everything. Your father-in-law has truly done a remarkable job. Of course, the major sects like Wu Dang and Shaolin did not attack with full force. One, we didn't want to act rashly before finding out the truth. Two, the Heavenly Eagle Sect didn't look to be the main culprit. This time, we got information that their Heavenly City Hall's Hall Leader Li headed out to sea, to look for Xie Xun. So we tried to follow them. But Hall Leader Li saw us, told us to leave. Kun Lun Sect then attacked them. Had you two not been here, both sides would've have suffered many more casualties."

Zhang CuiShan remained silent, while examined his second brother. Only to see his hair beginning to gray, and his face full of wrinkles. Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, you've been through a lot this past ten years. After surviving through these years, I was finally able to see you. I... I..."

Yu LianZhou saw the tears on Zhang CuiShan's face, and said, "It's fantastic to have the seven brothers united again. After third brother got injured, and you disappeared, everyone renamed us 'Five Heroes of Wu Dang'. Now we can changed it back to seven heroes again..." He then thought of Yu DaiYan's crippled condition. Even though there are seven of them again, no longer can all seven roam the martial world together. Yu LianZhou's heart saddened upon this realization.

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After sailing southward for about ten days, they arrived at the mouth of the Yangtze River. They switched to riding a riverboat, and rode up the river.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu changed into robes, looked no less amazing than ten years before. Wuji wore a new shirt, and a new pair of pants. He looked very cute with two pigtailed on his head.

Yu LianZhou spent his whole life on martial arts, never married or have kids. So he was very fond of Wuji. But due to his aloofness, Yu LianZhou's face remained cold. However, Wuji knew this cold-faced uncle is quite nice to him. When he has spare time, Wuji would ask Yu LianZhou all sorts of questions. Grown up on a deserted island, Wuji knew almost nothing about the mainland, and found everything interesting. Yu LianZhou didn't find Wuji annoying, and often hold him up on the front of the boat, to observe the river scenery. Wuji would ask nine or ten questions, and he'd just

give a short answer to one.

This day the boat arrived at the foot of the Tong Guan Mountain, in the An Hwei province. At dusk, the boat docked at a nearby town. The boatmen left the boat to go buy food. Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu, and Yu LianZhou stayed on the boat to chat.

Wuji played by himself at the head of the boat. He saw an old beggar on the dock, sitting on the ground and playing with a snake. A green snake rested on his head, while a black snake danced on his hands. That black snake quickly jumped onto his head and slithered its way down the man's back. Wuji had never seen a snake on the Fire-Ice Island. So he found it very interesting. When that old beggar saw him, he smiled, and flicked his finger. That black snake suddenly jumped up, did a flip in midair, and dropped into the beggar's chest pocket. Wuji stared intently. That old beggar gestured at him, hinting that he has more tricks should Wuji get closer.

Wuji quickly jumped off the ship toward him. The old beggar took out a sack, opened it up, and said, "There's something really fun inside. You want to see?" Wuji said, "What's inside?" That old beggar said, "It's very interesting. Take a look and you'll see." Wuji put his head close to look, but still couldn't see anything. He moved even closer, when that old beggar suddenly flipped his hands, covering Wuji's head in the sack. Wuji let out an 'Ah', but the old man quickly covered his mouth. Afterwards, Wuji felt his whole body being lifted up.

Wuji's scream within the sack was hardly loud. But both Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan heard him. They were quite far away, sitting inside the cabin. But upon the scream, they immediately rushed out to the front of the boat. Only to see the old beggar holding Wuji.

The two was about to jump off the boat, when that old beggar yelled, "If you value the child's life, then stay where you are." As he spoke, he tore off a piece of Wuji's shirt, and put that black snake next to Wuji's skin.

By now Yin SuSu also arrived. In a hurry to save Wuji, she immediately tried to throw the silver needles. But Yu LianZhou stopped her and said, "No!" He recognized that this black snake is called 'Shadow Star', a very famous breed of poisonous snake. The shinier its body, the more poisonous it is. This black snake shined brightly. Its mouth opened, aimed at Wuji's skin. Due the poison's potency, Wuji would die immediately if bitten. Even if the old man has the antidote, it would still be too late. Yu LianZhou's expression remained unchanged, and said, "May I ask. Why you are holding this child?"

That old beggar said, "Ask your boatman to immediately lift anchor, and move the boat out at least sixteen meters. Then we can talk." Yu LianZhou knew the old man was guarding against a rescue attempt. Should the boat leave shore, it would be much harder to rescue Wuji. But at this moment, he had no other choice. Yu LianZhou picked up the anchor-chain. With a light flip of the wrist, a sixty-some pound anchor came out of the water.

When the old beggar saw this scene, he was astonished at Yu LianZhou's inner power, and shuddered. Zhang CuiShan picked up the barge pole, pointed at the shore, and the boat backed away from the dock. That old beggar said, "Back off a little more!" Zhang CuiShan said calmly, "Isn't this more than sixteen meters?" That old beggar said, "After seeing Second Hero Yu's anchor-raising talent, I'd feel safer if you back off some more." Zhang CuiShan could only move the boat back some more.

Yu LianZhou said, "May I ask your name?" That old beggar said, "I'm a nobody in the Beggar's Clan. There's no need to clutter Second Hero Yu's ears with my name." Seeing six pouches on his chest, Yu LianZhou thought that this must be a six-pouch member within the Beggar's Clan. That's a fairly high rank. Why would he do something like this? Besides, the Beggar's Clan is a righteous clan, and its leader Shi HuoLong is quite renowned. This whole thing doesn't make sense.

Yin SuSu suddenly yelled, "Since when did Witch Mountain Clan join the Beggar's Clan? How come I didn't know?" That old beggar gasped, but didn't respond. Yin SuSu added, "Old Man He, what on earth are you doing? If you hurt a single hair on my son's body, I'll chop your Mei Shijian into tiny pieces!"

That old beggar trembled, said, "Miss Yin really has incredible vision, and recognize me. I am simply following Leader Mei's orders, to welcome your son." Yin SuSu said angrily, "Move the snake away! The nerve of you Witch Mountain Clan. You dare offend the Heavenly Eagle Sect?" Old Man He said, "I only wish an answer from Miss Yin, and will then immediately release your son afterwards." Yin SuSu said, "What's your question?"

Old Man He said, "Leader Mei's only son died in Xie Xun's hands. Something I'm sure you've heard. Leader Mei wishes to ask Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin... sorry, my mistake. I should call you Mrs. Zhang. If the two can give the location of Xie Xun, everyone in my clan will thank you."

Yin SuSu's eyebrows rose up, then said, "We don't know the answer." Old Man He said, "Then I wish you could find the answer for me. In the meantime, we'll take good care of your son. When you've found Xie Xun's location, Leader Mei will

personally return your son.”

Seeing the snake slithering next to her son’s skin, Yin SuSu stirred. She wanted to give him the answer. But as she turned her head toward Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu saw her husband’s determined expression. After ten year of marriage, she knew that Zhang CuiShan values loyalty and honor above all else. Should she reveal Xie Xun’s location, and cause his death, their marriage could very well break apart. So at the last moment, Yin SuSu stopped herself.

Zhang CuiShan said loudly, “Fine. Then go ahead and take my son. Do I look like someone who would betray his friends? Surely you didn’t expect that from the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang.”

Old Man He froze. He figured that with Wuji in his hands, Zhang CuiShan and his wife would surely divulge Xie Xun’s location. Who’d have thought that Zhang CuiShan would not be moved at all? Unsure of his next move, Old Man He said, “Second Hero Yu, Xie Xun’s crimes can fill a whole mountain. I know Wu Dang Sect is righteous. Surely you could help me on this matter.”

Yu LianZhou said, “But first, w must seek our master’s advice. Then we plan to host a gathering at Wu Chang City’s Yellow Crane Restaurant. Leader Mai is welcome there. At this gathering, we will have an answer.”

The boat rested about twenty meters from shore. Plus Yu LianZhou said this in a natural voice, yet Old Man He could hear each word clearly. With deep respect for the man, Old Man He thought, “The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang certainly lives up to their incredible fame. How could my little Witch Mountain Clan possibly go against the likes of Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect? Unfortunately, Leader Mei must

have his revenge.” So he bowed and said, “If so, then sorry for this inconvenience. I will take care of this child for now.”

Suddenly, Yin SuSu pushed a boatman from behind, and kicked another boatman. Both of them let out a yell, and fell into the water. Yin SuSu screamed, “Oww! Fifth brother, why did you hit me?” and started to shout and jump wildly. Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan both stood there stunned, not knowing what to make of her behavior. Old Man He was even more surprised, as he stared intently from afar.

It only took an instant for Yu LianZhou to realize what’s going on. Seeing Old Man He watching Yin SuSu attentively, he quickly drew out his sword, and threw it out with his inner power. The sword flew across the air. It sliced the poisonous black snake into two, and even cut off the four fingers holding the snake. At the same moment, Zhang CuiShan grabbed onto a rope hung on the ship’s mast. Pushing off with his feet on the ship, Zhang CuiShan swung toward the shore. He arrived just a bit later than Yu LianZhou’s sword. Before landing, Zhang CuiShan shifted his upper body forward, and the left palm shot out, striking Old Man He back a few meters. At the same time, his right hand grabbed onto Wuji.

Old Man He lied on the ground, unable to get back up again.

The two boatmen in the water didn’t know why Yin SuSu was enraged. They were afraid to return. Yin SuSu chuckled and said, “You can come up now. Allow me to apologize. Here’s a tael of silver each.”

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They continued the journey up the river. Zhang CuiShan was in a hurry to see his master and fellow brothers. So he

wanted to switch to horses upon reaching An Qing city. But Yu LianZhou said, "Fifth brother. I think its better to stay on the boat. It might take longer, but it's certainly safer. After all, who in the martial world doesn't want your sworn brother's location?" Yin SuSu said, "Surely no one would dare block Second Hero Yu's path." Yu LianZhou said, "If we seven brothers were together, I would be confident. But with just fifth brother and myself, there are no guarantees. Besides, we don't want to stir things up even more." Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "You are right, second brother."

A few days later, they've arrived at the city of Wu Xue, in Hu Bei province. This night, the boatmen anchored the boat, and prepared for sleep. Yu LianZhou suddenly heard horses galloping by the shore. He looked out, only to see two riders turn around at the dock, heading back to the city. Yu LianZhou only saw the riders' backs, but could tell that both knew kung fu. He turned and said to Zhang CuiShan, "It's not safe to remain here. Let's leave immediately." Zhang CuiShan said, "Ok!" He deeply appreciated his second brother's suggestion. The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang all have incredible kung fu, and do only righteous deeds. Generally, only people run from them, and not the other way around. In recent years, Yu LianZhou's reputation had grown tremendously, exceeding even the likes of Kong Dong and Kun Lun leaders. He must really care for Zhang CuiShan's family to run from these riders.

Yu LianZhou went to the head boatman, gave him three taels of silver. Then asked him to set sail immediately. Although the boatmen are tired, three taels of silver is just way too much money to pass up. The boatmen immediately pulled up the anchor, and left the dock.

The moon shined brightly in the sky, while a gentle breeze blew through the boat. Wuji had gone to sleep already. Yu

LianZhou and the Zhang couple sat outside, enjoying the scenery.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Our master's about to have his one hundredth birthday. I'm so glad that I can see this momentous event." Yin SuSu said, "Too bad we're in such a hurry. Otherwise, we really should have prepared a present."

Yu LianZhou said, "Sister-in-law, do you know who's my master's favorite disciple?" Yin SuSu said, "His favorite disciple? Obviously you, second brother-in-law." Yu LianZhou said with a smile, "That's a pretty insincere statement. You knew the true answer, but purposely gave the wrong one. Among us seven brothers, the one master cares for the most, is your handsome husband." Yin SuSu heart warmed. She shook her head and said, "I don't believe you."

Yu LianZhou said, "We seven brothers each have our own strengths. Eldest brother has profound comprehension of the Book of Changes. He's humble and forward thinking. Third brother's is the best at accomplishing tasks. He never failed any job master gave him. Fourth brother is the cleverest. Sixth brother is a master of the sword. Seventh brother has been concentrating on hard techniques. Soon, he'd have the best combination of inner power and outer strength, soft and hard molded into one." Yin SuSu said, "What about you?" Yu LianZhou said, "My aptitude is too low, and therefore lack a strong point. You could say that I practice master's kung fu more meticulously than others." Yin SuSu smiled and said, "You have the best kung fu among the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang. But you're too modest to say it."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Among us, second brother always had been the best at kung fu. Ten years apart, now I'm even further behind second brother. After missing out on ten years of teachings, I'm definitely the lowest ranked among us

brothers.”

Yu LianZhou said, “But among us, only you are skilled at both kung fu and academics. Sister-in-law, I’ll let you in on a secret. Five years ago, at master’s ninety-fifth birthday, we held a banquet to celebrate. During the banquet, master suddenly frowned. He said, ‘Among my seven disciples, the one with the best comprehension, the only one who is knowledgeable in academics and in martial arts, is CuiShan. I had hoped that he would be the disciple to carry on my legacy. But alas, fate had decided otherwise. Five years of disappearance does not bode well for his fortune.’ You tell me, sister-in-law, does master like fifth brother the most?”

Yin SuSu’s face brightened like a flower. Zhang CuiShan felt deep gratitude, and tears came out of his eyes.

Yu LianZhou said, “So the best present for master, quite frankly, is the safe return of fifth brother.”

At this moment, they suddenly heard horses galloping on the shore. The sound went from east to west, quite loud in the silent night, a total of four horses. The three of them glanced at each other. They knew that these riders are likely seeking them out. Although they didn’t want trouble, none of them are scared of anyone. So they simply ignored these riders.

Yu LianZhou said, “When I came down the mountain this time, master was meditating in seclusion. Hopefully, he’ll be finished by the time we get back.” Yin SuSu said, “My father once told me, he only respected two people in life. One is Leader Yang of the Ming Sect. One is your master Taoist Zhang. My dad didn’t even respect the Shaolin’s four divine reverends all that much. Considering your master’s old age and unparalleled martial arts ability, why would he still need to meditate in seclusion? Is he trying to obtain eternal life?”

Yu LianZhou said, “No. Master’s studying martial arts.” Yin SuSu said in shock, “He’s martial arts ability is already unparalleled. What’s the point of further studying martial arts? Is there actually someone who’s his adversary?”

Yu LianZhou said, “Upon reaching ninety-five, master would meditate nine months out of the year. He once said, Wu Dang martial arts came mostly from a book called the . Unfortunately, master was too young, and didn’t know martial arts, when he learned it from martial grandfather Jue Yuan. Martial grandfather Jue Yuan also wasn’t purposely teaching him the scripture. He simply recited it by chance. Therefore, there’s always this gap within our school of martial arts. Supposedly, Originator Da Muo wrote this . But according to master, this is not likely the truth. First of all, the contents of this Holy Scripture are quite different from Shaolin’s martial arts style. It resembled Taoist philosophy instead. Also, this was written in Chinese, not in Sanskrit. All the words are situated on the borders of a Sanskrit-worded . Despite Originator Da Muo’s brilliance, he’s still from another country. It’s unlikely that he’s proficient in writing Chinese. Plus, for such an important martial art scripture, why would he write within another book, rather than on separate papers by itself.”

*Note: This is the same [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] in Athena’s translation.

**Note: Sorry, I have no clue as to what this book is.

Zhang CuiShan nodded, asked, “So how did master explain all this?”

Yu LianZhou said, “Master doesn’t know the exact story either. He figured that a Shaolin monk wrote it, but penned under Originator Da Muo’s name. Master thought, if the he

memorized was not complete, why not try to create the rest? Therefore, he has spent much time developing a new type of martial arts philosophy, one different from all others in the world.”

Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu sighed in admiration. Yu LianZhou said, “Reverend Jue Yuan recited this in front of three people. One is master, one is Shaolin’s Reverend Wu Se, one is a young woman. She is the founder of E Mei, Heroine Guo Xiang.” Yin SuSu said, “I’ve heard my father speak of her. He said that Heroine Guo is a very significant individual. Her father is Guo Jing, Hero Guo. Her mother was Huang Rong, former leader of the Beggar’s Clan. When the city of Xiang Yang fell to the Mongols, Hero Guo and his wife both died in the city’s defense.”

Yu LianZhou said, “You are correct. Master actually met Hero Guo and his wife at the peak of Mount Hua. Every time he brings up the couple, master would praise their heroism. He says that anyone who practices martial arts should look at them as role models.” Yu LianZhou paused for a moment, then continued, “Each of the three people learned the differently. Reverend Wu Se had the strongest martial arts among the three. As the daughter of Hero Guo and Clan Leader Huang, Heroine Guo had the richest martial arts background. Master knew basically no martial arts at the time. But for this reason, he learned the scripture in its purest form. Therefore, Shaolin, E Mei, and Wu Dang each gained ‘strong’, ‘rich’ and ‘pure’ aspects of the scripture, respectively. Each sect has its own strengths, but also weaknesses.”

Yin SuSu said, “This Reverend Jue Yuan must’ve had incredible martial arts skills.”

Yu LianZhou said, “No. Martial grandfather Jue Yuan did not

know kung fu. He was the librarian for Shaolin's library of scriptures. He absolutely loved book, and read every single one. He found by accident, and read it like any other scripture. As for the martial arts philosophies, he understood them, but just the inner power portion, not the techniques." Yu LianZhou then told the story of to the couple.

Zhang CuiShan had already heard the story from master. But Yin SuSu had not, and was quite fascinated. She said, "I didn't know E Mei and Wu Dang had such a relationship. Why didn't this Heroine Guo marry your Master Zhang?"

Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Oh, don't be ridiculous."

Yu LianZhou said, "After parting under the Shao Bao Mountain, master and Heroine Guo never met again. Master said, Heroine Guo could not forget one person. He is the one who killed the Mongol Emperor outside Xiang Yang with a stone pellet, Condor Hero Yang Guo. Heroine Guo searched the whole world, but could not find Hero Yang. At the age of forty, she finally found enlightenment, gave up the search, and became a nun. Afterwards, she founded the E Mei Sect."

Yin SuSu gasped, and felt pity for Guo Xiang. She glanced at Zhang CuiShan, who glanced back the same time. They both thought, "In Heaven or in Hell, we shall never be apart. Our fate is certainly much better than this Heroine Guo."

Normally, Yu LianZhou would almost never speak. Yet after reuniting with Zhang CuiShan, he lightened up a great deal, even enjoying chats with the couple. After spending some days with Yin SuSu, he found that her nature is benign. It's her upbringing that made her so cruel and merciless. But after ten years of marriage with Zhang CuiShan, her temper had subsided a great deal. Yu LianZhou had changed his first impression of her. In fact, he admired her straightforward

tendencies, much more pleasant than those self-righteous, arrogant members of the righteous sects.

At this moment, sound of horses could be heard again. Zhang CuiShan ignored the noise, said, "Second brother, if the master welcomed Shaolin and E Mei elders to study the scripture with him, all three sects would benefit greatly."

Yu LianZhou said, "That would be a great idea. No wonder master said that you'd be the one who'd carry his legacy." Zhang CuiShan said, "Master only felt that way because I was not around. After all, the child away is the one parents think about the most. Not only is my ability worse than eldest or second brother, even sixth and seventh brother are much better than I am now."

Yu LianZhou shook his head and said, "You can't look at it that way. From a pure martial arts standpoint, I am better than you. But master always says, the world is so vast, the honor of Wu Dang itself is insignificant. The importance is to research into the depths of martial arts philosophies, and pass them down to future generations, so the righteous martial arts will overcome those of evil. In addition, we could unite practitioners throughout our land, drive out the Mongols, and reclaim our country. These are the reasons why we practice martial arts. To carry on our master's legacy, one must first have a good heart. Then have incredible comprehension skills. When it comes to heart, there's no different between us brothers. But in terms of comprehension, you are certainly the best." Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I'm sure the master just said it at the spur of the moment. Surely I'm not worthy of such a praise."

Yu LianZhou smiled, and said, "Sister-in-law, go take care of Wuji. Don't let him get scared. Fifth brother and I will take care of the problems outside." Yin SuSu looked around, but

didn't find anything unordinary. As she hesitated, Yu LianZhou said, "Behind the bushes on the shore, there are weapons flashing. Which means someone's trying to ambush us. There should be enemy boats up ahead."

Yin SuSu did not notice anything, and thought that perhaps there's something wrong with Yu LianZhou's eyes.

When suddenly, Yu LianZhou spoke loudly, "Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, are passing through this area. If friends would like to chat, feel free to come have a drink with us." When he finished speaking, sounds of paddling came from the reeds. Six small boats came at them. A sound-arrow shot out of one boat, and ten or so people on the shore began to move. They all wore black clothes, held different types of weapons, and covered their faces with masks.

Yin SuSu thought in awe, "Second brother-in-law really is amazing." With the enemy coming in, she hurriedly went inside the cabin, only to see Wuji already awake. Yin SuSu helped him put on some clothes, and whispered, "Don't be afraid, honey."

Yu LianZhou spoke again, "Who are you? Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, says hello." Other than a single boatman paddling each ship, no one else even appeared, much less responded.

Yu LianZhou suddenly came to a realization. He yelled, "Oh no!" and immediately dived into the water. Having grown up near a river, his swimming skills are excellent. He immediately saw four people swimming underwater, each holding a sharp prick, as if wanting to make a hole to the ship.

Yu LianZhou waited till they were close, and quickly attacked

with both hands, sealing two enemies' pressure points. His leg shot out and hit the pressure point on the third enemy's waist. The fourth tried to swim away, but Yu LianZhou quickly grabbed his feet, and threw him up onto the boat. Realizing that with their pressure points sealed, the other three people would die underwater, Yu LianZhou threw them onto the boat too. That fourth person rolled once on the deck, and stood up. He then immediately attacked Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan saw that the attacker's kung fu is mediocre, didn't block, and simply grabbed his wrist with the left hand, then struck that person's pressure point on the chest with the left elbow. That man let out a light yell, and fell to the ground.

Yu LianZhou said, "There are some decent fighters on the shore. Enough talk, let's break through." Zhang CuiShan nodded, and ordered the boatmen to just keep going. When they sailed near the six small boats, Yu LianZhou picked up those four men, unsealed their pressure points, and threw them over to the other boats. Oddly enough, no one on the other boats made a sound. Even the people on the shore remained silent, as if they're all mute. The four men Yu LianZhou threw went into the cabin.

Just as their boat passed by the six opposing boats, one of their boatmen suddenly threw something with his hand. After hearing two 'ping' sounds, the wood on their boat started flying everywhere, and an explosion destroyed the rudder. The boat itself suddenly turned horizontally. That sailor had thrown two fish bombs, which fishers use to catch fish. However, the one he used had much more explosives than a typical one. So it could destroy parts of the boat.

Yu LianZhou remained calm, and quickly jumped to the neighboring boat. Confident of his abilities, Yu LianZhou went empty-handed.

The boatman did not react as he landed. Yu LianZhou yelled, "Who threw that fish bomb?" The boatman did not respond. Yu LianZhou walked into the cabin, and saw two men sitting inside. Neither reacted upon his entrance. Yu LianZhou grabbed one of them, yelled, "Where's your scoop to throw out water?" That person did not respond. Yu LianZhou didn't want to force him, and returned back out. He saw that the Zhang family had already made it to this boat.

Yu LianZhou snatched away the oar, and began to paddle this new boat. After a moment, Yin SuSu yelled, "They've scuttled the boat!" as they saw water seeping through the bottom. There was a hole on the bottom of the boat, which was covered by a cork. But now that the cork has been removed, water flooded in. Yu LianZhou jumped to the second boat, and saw a small pool of water on the deck. He turned around and said, "Fifth brother. Since they're forcing us to land, let's grant their wish!" Those six boats are perfectly positioned as stepping-stones, allowing them to easily jump to shore.

The remaining ten-plus hooded figures positioned in a semi-circle, surrounding them. The majority held long swords, but a few held double sabers, or whips, but no heavy weapons.

Yu LianZhou looked around, but didn't say anything.

The person in the middle gestured with his hand, and the crowd split apart. All of them bowed, their weapons facing the ground, opening a path. Yu LianZhou returned a bow, and walked through the opening. Just as he left, the people returned to their positions, surrounded the remaining three people.

Zhang CuiShan laughed, and said, "Oh, so you are all here for me. I'm quite honored that you've spent so much effort to

capture me.” That middle person thought for a moment, and the crowd opened up a path again. Zhang CuiShan said, “SuSu, you go first!”

Yin SuSu, carrying Wuji, began to walk out, when suddenly the sound of wind surrounded her, as five swords came right at Wuji. Yin SuSu retreated in shock. Those five people continued to pursue her, the sword tips continuously vibrated, but always near Wuji.

Yu LianZhou leapt forward, and flew toward the battle. His two hands quickly shot out four times, each time hitting one of the hooded person’s wrist. In a flash, their four swords flew up into the air. Yu LianZhou quickly followed the four strikes by grabbing the fifth person’s wrist, and sealed that hand’s pressure point. The hand he struck felt quite soft, like that of a woman, so he quickly let go. That person’s hand became numb, and immediately dropped the sword.

With no swords in their hands, all five hooded figures retreated. Two more sparkles appeared under the moonlight, as another two swords came at Yu LianZhou. The sword edges pointed horizontally, the tips slashed from left to right, both attackers used the technique ‘Calm Desert Sand’. But there’s not much force behind the technique, as if they didn’t want to hurt him.

Yu LianZhou thought, “Kun Lun Sword Art! These are from the Kun Lun Sect!” When the swords reached about a feet from his chest, his chest contracted, two arms swept down from above, striking the flat area of the two swords.

These two strikes applied Wu Dang’s inner power. Normally, this should result in both swords dropping from the hands. However, during the moment of contact, Yu LianZhou felt a soft force coming out of the sword, which neutralized part of

his power, and allowed the swords to remain in hand. But even so, Yu LianZhou's power still pushed back the two attackers. One couldn't maintain balance, and fell to the ground. The other let out a cry, and coughed out some blood.

This was the first time any of these people let out a sound. The cry sounded like a woman's voice.

The middle hooded person waved the left hand, and everyone retreated away. Most of these people looked quite lean, most likely women dressed in men's clothing. Yu LianZhou said, "Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, wish to apologize to 'Mr. Iron Zither', for causing all this trouble." Those hooded figures did not respond, but one of them chuckled ever so slightly, in a woman's voice.

Yin SuSu put down Wuji, grabbed his hand tightly, and said, "The majority of them should be women. Second brother-in-law, are they from the Kun Lun Sect?" Yu LianZhou said, "No, they are E Mei disciples." Zhang CuiShan asked in surprise, "Then why did you mention 'Mr. Iron Zither'?"

Yu LianZhou sighed, and said, "They covered their own faces, unwilling to speak a word. So they obviously wished to hide their identity. When the five swords attacked Wuji, they used Kun Lun Sect's 'Winter Plum Sword Formation'. The technique against me was 'Calm Desert Sand'. I played along, went ahead and apologized 'Mr. Iron Zither' He TaiChong."

Yin SuSu said, "But how do you know they're E Mei disciples? Did you recognize someone?"

Yu LianZhou said, "No. None of their martial arts abilities are deep. Probably two generations removed from E Mei's Master Mie Jue. Or perhaps some of her latest disciples. I don't know

any of them. However, they did indeed use E Mei's inner power to neutralize my two strikes against their swords. It's not hard to copy someone else's techniques. But you can't cover up your inner power."

Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "When you struck their swords, they should've let go to avoid serious injuries. E Mei's inner power is quite powerful. However, they didn't have the ability to utilize it to full potential. Had second brother been fighting for real, both of them would've been dead by now. But E Mei and Wu Dang had always been on friendly terms."

Yu LianZhou said, "E Mei founder Heroine Guo helped out our master in his youth. For this reason, he always told us not to offend E Mei Sect, for old times sake. When I realized those two people were E Mei disciples, I tried to retract my inner power, but was too late. I didn't mean to hurt them, but nonetheless disobeyed master's orders."

Yin SuSu said, "Thankfully, you pretended that they're Kun Lun Sect. So you didn't officially offend the E Mei Sect."

The boat they were on kept sailing during this whole time. By now it's long gone. The six smaller boats have sunk. Its occupants all swam ashore. Yin SuSu said, "Are these also E Mei disciples?" Yu LianZhou whispered, "Most likely Lake Chao's Grain-Boat Clan." Yin SuSu looked at the five swords on the ground, and wanted to examine them. Yu LianZhou said, "Don't touch these weapons. If they have names on them, we'd have trouble claiming ignorance on the matter. Let's just leave now!" Yin SuSu nodded in agreement and said, "You're right." She grabbed Wuji's hand and walked towards the road.

After walking for a while, they saw three horses tied to a tree. Wuji yelled happily, "Horses! Horses!" Wuji had always

wanted to ride a horse since coming to the mainland. But because they kept traveling by boat, he never got the chance.

When the four got close to, they saw a note stuck to the tree. Zhang CuiShan took down the note, and read it, "Please accept these three horses, as an apology for inconveniencing you." The characters were written in charcoal, very delicately, in a lady's writing style. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Looks like this E Mei lady wrote to Heroes of Wu Dang using a charcoal pencil for drawing eyebrows." Yu LianZhou said, "Well, they're certainly quite courteous." He untied the horses, and everyone got on. Wuji sat in front of his mother, feeling very excited.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Since everyone knows our movement anyway, we might as well ride horses. Yu LianZhou said, "You're right. There will surely be more troubles ahead. If we must fight, don't be too ruthless." He still felt quite uneasy for hurting those two E Mei disciples.

Yin SuSu felt ashamed, thought, "Second brother-in-law only used a bit too much force. He didn't even intend to hurt anyone. They only sustained injuries because they wouldn't let go of the swords. We really shouldn't let second brother-in-law get further involved in this matter." So she said, "Second brother-in-law. These people came for my family. If we encounter any trouble, my husband and I will take care of it. If we can't handle them, then we can ask you for help." Yu LianZhou said, "Do not treat me as an outsider. After all, we brothers live together and die together. Your problems are my problems."

Yin SuSu stopped discussing this matter, and asked, "If they knew you were with us, why did E Mei just send some younger disciples to block our way?" Yu LianZhou said, "They

probably didn't have time to gather the more powerful disciples."

Zhang CuiShan figured these disciples came because of Xie Xun, and said, "Looks like my sworn brother is also an enemy of E Mei. How come he never told me back on Fire-Ice Island?"

Yu LianZhou sighed, and said, "E Mei's a very strict sect, with mostly female disciples. Master Mie Jue doesn't let her female disciples wander around freely. So even we used to find it strange that E Mei would go against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. However, we recently found out the reason. One night, 'Golden Hammer' Fang Ping, Old Hero Fang of the Kai Feng City in He Nan province, was killed. The words 'The murderer is Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun' were written on the wall." Yin SuSu asked, "Is Fang Ping a member of the E Mei Sect?" Yu LianZhou said, "No. But Master Mie Jue's surname was 'Fang' before becoming a nun. That Old Hero Fang was Master Mie Jue's brother." Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu gasped at the same time.

Wuji suddenly asked, "Second uncle, is that Old Hero Fang a good person or a bad person?" Yu LianZhou said, "I heard that he was a recluse, and spends his days farming and reading. So he should be a good person." Wuji said, "Oh, godfather really shouldn't be killing so recklessly." Yu LianZhou was overjoyed, reached out for Wuji's arms, and took him from Yin SuSu. He said, "Son, your second uncle's very happy for you, since you know to not kill recklessly. A person who dies cannot be resurrected. So even if your opponent is the most devious, vicious person in the world, you still shouldn't automatically kill him. Try giving people a chance to reform."

Wuji said, "Second uncle, can you do something for me?" Yu

LianZhou asked, "What?" Wu Ji said, "If they really do find godfather, can you tell them not to kill him? His eyes are now blind, and can't beat these people." Yu LianZhou thought for a moment, then said, "I don't have the power to do this. But I myself will promise not to kill him." Wuji did not speak further, but tears came down his eyes.

The next day, they've arrived at a town. After sleeping for a while in an inn, they continued in the afternoon. Sometimes Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan would ride together, so Wuji could get a taste for riding alone. As a child, Wuji forgets his worries quickly. After riding alone for a while, he quickly forgot about Xie Xun's problems.

Following a day of riding, they almost reached the city of An Lu. Suddenly, ten or so merchants hurried past them. When they saw Yu LianZhou, one quickly shook his hand and yelled, "Turn round quickly! Mongolian soldiers are killing and pillaging ahead." Another said to Yin SuSu, "You are one brave lady. But you really shouldn't let the soldiers see you." Yu LianZhou asked, "How many soldiers?" One merchant said, "Ten-plus. All looked really mean." He quickly ran away as he spoke.

The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang hated cruel Mongolian soldiers more than anything else. Zhang SanFeng is very strict about combat. Unless it's absolutely necessary, his disciples should never get into fights. However, if the opponents are Mongolian soldiers acting viciously, then they have the go-ahead to kill. For this reason, if the seven heroes see large contingents of soldiers, they'll simply hide. But if they meet only a few soldiers, then they'd eliminate the soldiers. So when Yu and Zhang heard that there are only ten or so soldiers, they immediately galloped ahead.

After riding for another mile, they heard loud cries ahead.

Zhang CuiShan went in front, and saw over ten soldiers holding spears and sabers, terrorizing a group of civilians. The ground is filled with blood, as seven or eight civilians were already dead on the ground. Only to see one soldier picking up a child of about three or four, and then kicked him into the air. When the child came down, another soldier kicked him up again, like kicking a bouncing ball. After a few kicks, the child's breathing stopped. Filled with rage, Zhang CuiShan flew off the horse. Before hitting the ground, his fist struck one of the soldiers, who instantly fell to the ground. At this time, another soldier came at him with a spear.

Wuji yelled, "Daddy, watch out!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Watch your dad beat up on Mongol soldiers." When the spear nearly reached him, Zhang CuiShan grabbed the spear tip, and pushed it backward into that soldier's chest. That soldier let out a loud scream, fell to the ground, seemingly dead.

Upon seeing Zhang CuiShan's actions, the other soldiers surrounded him. Yin SuSu got off the horse and quickly snatched one of the soldier's sabers. She immediately killed two soldiers with it. The other soldiers quickly realized that something's wrong, and began to run away. Yu LianZhou yelled, "Don't let them get away." He quickly went west to block four of the soldiers. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu also split up to catch the remaining soldiers. All three knew that these soldiers' fighting abilities are very mediocre, not even Wuji's match. So they were comfortable leaving him alone.

Wuji jumped off the horse. He saw his parents and second uncle leap as if they're flying, clapped his hands and yelled, "Great! Great!" When suddenly, the soldier Zhang CuiShan knocked down with the spear sprung up. He quickly grabbed Wuji, jumped onto a horse, and began to gallop away.

Yu LianZhou and the Zhang couple gasped in shock. They quickly gave chase. Yu LianZhou leapt just two times before catching up to the horse. He jumped up again, and shot out with his left palm, aimed at that soldier's back. That soldier didn't even bother to turn around. His palm came out behind, matching Yu LianZhou's palm. Yu LianZhou sensed the opposing palm sending out an extremely powerful force, filled with incredibly icy yin-based inner power. Yu LianZhou felt like his whole body was frozen. He stuttered a bit, and retreated a few steps.

That soldier also couldn't handle Yu LianZhou's palm either, and fell off the horse. He then carried Wuji and ran forward. Applying lightness kung fu, he was already forty-some meters away in an instant.

When Zhang CuiShan caught up to Yu LianZhou, he saw a pale expression on his second brother. Knowing that he's seriously injured, Zhang CuiShan went over to help him.

Yin SuSu cared deeply for her child, and kept chasing. But that Mongolian soldier's lightness kung fu is much better than hers. He quickly disappeared into the distance. Even so, Yin SuSu still wouldn't give up. She only had one thought in mind, "Even if it costs me my life, I still must get my son back."

Yu LianZhou whispered, "Quick, get sister-in-law to stop chasing..." Zhang CuiShan raised his spear and killed the two soldiers besides them. He asked, "How's your injury?" Yu LianZhou said, "It's no big deal. First... first catch sister-in-law." Zhang CuiShan was afraid that there are more kung fu experts among the remaining soldiers. So he went around and killed all the soldiers first. Then he got on a horse to chase after Yin SuSu.

After a few miles, he finally saw Yin SuSu. But her steps are staggered, obviously from exhaustion. Zhang CuiShan picked her up onto the horse. Yin SuSu pointed forward, and cried in tears, "He's gone. I couldn't catch up, couldn't catch up." And then her eyes closed, and fainted.

Zhang CuiShan worried about Yu LianZhou, and thought, "I must first take care of second brother, then worry about Wuji." He turned his horse around, and returned to Yu LianZhou, only to see him meditating on the ground, readjusting his flow of chi.

Yin SuSu slowly regained consciousness, and immediately yelled, "Wuji! Wuji!" Yu LianZhou's face also slowly regained its color, opened his eyes, and said softly, "What amazing palm power!"

Upon hearing his second brother speak, Zhang CuiShan knew the injuries aren't life threatening. Zhang CuiShan calmed a bit, but still afraid to converse with Yu LianZhou. Yu LianZhou slowly got up, and said softly, "Is he gone?" Yin SuSu cried, "Second brother-in-law, what... what should we do?" Yu LianZhou said, "This person's kung fu is very good. He won't harm a little kid." Yin SuSu said, "But... but he kidnapped Wuji."

Yu LianZhou nodded, and put one hand on Zhang CuiShan's shoulder. After thinking for a while, he said, "I can't figure out the origin of his kung fu. Let's go ask master about it." Yin SuSu felt extremely irritated, said, "Second brother-in-law. We have to find a way to get back Wuji first. The kidnapper's origin doesn't matter right now." Yu LianZhou shook his head.

Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu. Second brother's seriously wounded. That person's kung fu is also incredibly high. Even if we catch up, what can we do?" Yin SuSu said impatiently,

“So... so are we just going to give up?” Zhang CuiShan said, “Even if we don’t find him, he’s going to come to us.”

Yin SuSu is normally very intelligent, but the loss of her child really messed up her mind. But upon her husband’s words, she immediately understood everything. If that soldier could injure Yu LianZhou in one blow, he could easily kill her and her husband. But instead, the soldier simply kidnapped Wuji. Obviously, the soldier wants to know Xie Xun’s location. When Zhang CuiShan knocked him down with the spear, none of them cared to examine his appearance. Now that they thought back to it, that soldier looked like a typical Mongol soldier.

Zhang CuiShan sent his second brother onto the horse, and grabbed the horse’s leash. The three horses strolled forward. Upon reaching An Lu City, they rested at a small inn. After asking the worker to send in food, the three stayed in the room. They were afraid of meeting more soldiers and get into trouble.

After killing those soldiers on the road, they knew the government would retaliate by killing more innocent people. But at that moment, they could hardly ignore the situation. This is called ‘The cruel fate of a conquered nation, country rich and vast, yet people live in torment’.

Yu LianZhou kept circulating his chi, trying to heal his injury. Zhang CuiShan sat besides him. Yin SuSu leaned back on her chair, but could not sleep. At midnight, Yu LianZhou stood up, and walked around the room three times to loosen up. He said, “Fifth brother, other than master, I’ve never met such a powerful person.”

Yin SuSu only had her son in mind, and said, “He kidnapped Wuji, obviously to find sworn brother’s location. I wonder if

Wuji would say it.” Zhang CuiShan said, “If Wuji said it, would he still be our son?” Yin SuSu said, “Right! He absolutely would not say it.” Suddenly, she began to cry. Zhang CuiShan quickly asked, “What’s going on?” Yin SuSu choked with sobs, said, “If Wuji won’t answer, that monster... that monster would certainly beat him, perhaps they’d even use... use the torture chamber.”

Yu LianZhou sighed. Zhang CuiShan said, “If jade isn’t carved, it won’t turn into a tool. This might be a good experience for him.” Although he says this, Zhang CuiShan’s heart is filled with grief, and the hope that Wuji’s ok. But if Wuji is resting peacefully right now, then he must’ve told his godfather’s location. It’s much better for Wuji to be tortured than for him to be ungrateful and dishonorable. Zhang CuiShan thought, “Rather for him to be dead than live as a dishonorable person.” He glanced at his wife, only to see tear-filled face with a grief-stricken, pitiful expression. He shuddered and thought, “If that person came and pressured with Wuji’s life, perhaps SuSu might give in.” So He said, “Second brother, are you alright now?”

The two brothers grew up together. Through just a single question and expression, they could read each other’s thoughts. Yu LianZhou looked at the couple’s expressions, and realized Zhang CuiShan’s intention. He said, “I’m fine. Let’s leave tonight.”

Under the cover of darkness, the three traveled on the smaller roads. They weren’t afraid of that person coming to kill them, but rather he torture Wuji in front of them.

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But by traveling this way, they had no problems on the road. However, grief-stricken by the loss of her son, Yin SuSu

became ill. Zhang CuiShan hired two mule-carts to carry Yin SuSu and Yu LianZhou. He himself rode his horse on the side. They finally passed by the city of Xiang Yang, and stopped at an inn in the town of Tai Ping Dian to rest.

Zhang CuiShan took care of his second brother, and was about to return to his own room. When suddenly a man opened the door and came in. This person held a horsewhip in his hand, and looked like a cart-driver. He looked at Zhang and Yu, let out a snicker, and walked back out. Zhang CuiShan knew he's up to no good, and felt quite annoyed at his blatant disrespect. Just as that man released the door curtain to leave, Zhang CuiShan grabbed the curtain, applied his inner power, and sent it forward. The bottom of the curtain swung up, and hit that man squarely on the back, sent him flying before falling flat on his face.

That man got up and yelled, "Wu Dang punks. Don't be so smug. You're all about to die!" Despite talking this way, the man ran away as fast as he could. However, he must've been injured, for he kept staggering while running.

Yu LianZhou saw the whole event, but didn't say anything. At dusk, Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, lets go!" Yu LianZhou said, "No. We stay tonight. Let's leave tomorrow." Zhang CuiShan paused for a second, then realized his brother's intentions. He said, "You're right. We're only two days away from the mountain. Even though the seven brothers are not together, we still cannot let down our sect's reputation. How can we hide from others at the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain?"

Yu LianZhou smiled lightly and said, "Since our tracks have already been exposed, I want to see just how we're about to die."

The two walked over to Zhang CuiShan's room, sat by the fire and meditated. That night, seven or eight people kept walking around their room, but none dared to go in. Yin SuSu slept through the entire night, not knowing what's going on. Zhang and Yu simply ignored the people.

The three of them left after finishing breakfast. Yu LianZhou told the driver to take off the cover on his cart, so he could see outside.

After traveling a few miles out the town, three riders caught up from behind, and followed the mule-carts. They kept about thirty meters back, and didn't try to get any closer. After a while, they found four riders in front. After the mule-carts passed them, these four riders joined with the previous three. A few miles later, four more riders caught up, with eleven total now. The cart-drivers began to panic, and whispered to Zhang CuiShan, "Sir, these people don't look right. Perhaps they're bandits. You should be careful." Zhang CuiShan nodded.

By noon, six more people joined up. These riders all looked different. Some dressed in expensive, silk robes, while others look like beggars. But all carried weapons. None of them spoke, so one can't tell their dialect. However, all of them are short and have dark skin. So they're likely from the south. By the afternoon, twenty-one riders had gathered behind them. Some of the more daring riders got as close as about ten meters, but wouldn't dare get closer. Yu LianZhou simply meditated in the cart, ignoring them.

By dusk, two riders came from the front. The first rider is an empty-handed old man. The second rider is a colorfully dressed married woman, holding a pair of sabers. The two horses stopped in the middle of the road, blocking their path.

Zhang CuiShan held down his anger, and said courteously, "Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, says hello. May I ask the elder's name?" That old man said, "Where is Gold-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun? If you tell me, I will let you through." Zhang CuiShan said, "I cannot answer this question. Allow me to ask master for permission first."

That old man said, "With Second Yu's injured, you're only one person. Don't think you can defeat all of us." As he spoke, the old man took out a pair of judge's brushes. The tips of the brushes are in the shape of serpent heads.

Zhang CuiShan uses a judge's brush himself, so he's familiar with all of the famous brush users in the martial world. Upon seeing this serpent-like brush tip, he recalled that his master once said, there's a sect in the Gao Li* region who specializes in judge's brushes. Their brush tips are in the shape of serpent heads. They also use different moves and pressure point techniques compared to brush users in the central plains. Perhaps due to the serpent head tip, their techniques are quite vicious. The sect is called the 'Green Dragon Sect'. The most renowned member is someone with a surname of 'Quan'. But master did not know of his name. So Zhang CuiShan put together his fist and said, "Is elder a member of Gao Li's Green Dragon Sect? How do you refer to Elder Quan?"

*Note: Gao Li is in the present day Northeastern region of China. It was an independent country for a short while in history.

That old man froze, thought, "This person looks to be thirty-some years old. How could he know my background?" This old man is head of the Gao Li's Green Dragon Sect. His name is Quan JianNan. Sourthern Ling region's 'Three River Clan' leader requested his help, and even offered large amounts of

gifts. Quan JianNan has only been in the central plains for a short while, and had not fought. So he was very surprised when Zhang CuiShan pointed out his origin. and said, "I am Quan JianNan."

Zhang Cuishan said, "The Green Dragon Sect never associates with people in the central plains. What had Wu Dang done that angered Old Hero Quan? Please enlighten us." Quan JianNan said, "I have nothing against you. I also know about a Wu Dang Sect back in Gao Li. And that the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are all righteous men. I just have one question, 'Where is Golden-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun?'"

Although these words didn't seem disrespectful, they showed clear hostile intentions. At the same time, Quan JianNan waved his judge's brush. The riders behind them quickly scattered, surrounding the carts. Their intentions are obvious. If Zhang CuiShan did not reveal Xie Xun's location, they will attack.

Zhang CuiShan said, "What if I don't want to say the location?" Quan JianNan said, "I know Fifth Hero Zhang's kung fu is formidable. Even though we have many people, I doubt we could keep you here. However, Second Hero Yu is injured, and your wife is ill. Given such an opportunity, we'll have to take advantage, and capture them. But you are free to leave."

Zhang CuiShan did not like his tone at all, and said, "Fine. If so, then let me see just how good Gao Li martial arts is. What if Elder Quan loses?"

Quan JianNan said, "If I lose, then everyone will attack at once. We're not going to use that stupid one-on-one rule here. If Wu Dang had more people, you can also try to win through numbers. Back when Sui YangDi*, Tang TaiZong*,

and Tang GaoZong* invaded Gao Li, didn't they also win through numbers with their large number of troops? Since the beginning of history, people had been using numbers to their advantage."

*Note: 'Sui YangDi' is the imperial name for Yang Guang, the infamous second(and last) emperor of the Sui Dynasty. Tang TaiZong and Tang GaoZong are the imperial names for Li ShiMin and Li Zhi, respectively. They are the second and the third emperor of the Tang Dynasty. These emperors ruled pretty much in succession, with Li ShiMin's father Li Yuan ruling in between them. However, Li Yuan ruled during much civil strife, which is probably why he didn't bother attacking Gao Li.

Zhang CuiShan knew he couldn't talk out of this situation. He figured that capturing Quan JianNan might get them to back off. So he got off the horse, and took out a silver tiger hook with his left hand, and an iron judge's brush with his right. Zhang CuiShan said, "After you." Zhang CuiShan's previous judge's brush fell into the sea. After returning, he bought a new one. Although it's not as good as the previous one, it was the best available.

Quan JianNan also came down the horse, and attacked. His right brush pointed gently, while his left brush still hasn't came out, as his body had already reached the opponent. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Today I'm fighting for my sworn brother. As his sworn brother and sworn sister, my wife and I can die for him. But this doesn't concern second brother at all. And he shouldn't get hurt because of this." As Quan JianNan's right brush nears, the hook came up to block, which used twenty percent of Zhang CuiShan's power. As the hook and brush met, Zhang CuiShan's body shook.

Quan JianNan thought happily, "The Three-River Clan kept

saying how powerful Wu Dang is. But this guy's nothing. They must've been exaggerating." He quickly followed up with his left brush. Zhang CuiShan had trouble blocking, but still hung on. Quan JianNan thought that should he defeat Fifth Hero Zhang, his fame would rise dramatically. With this thought, his brushes came even faster, each attack pointed at Zhang CuiShan's vital area.

Zhang CuiShan blocked tightly, while carefully examining his opponent's moves. Quan JianNan's moves looked light and flexible, but there's great power on the tip of the brush. The brush targets emphasized the lower body and the back, much different from brush users in the central plains. Upon further examination, his left brush attacked only the back's 'Ling Tai' or lower points, like 'Zhi Yang', 'Jin Sui', 'Zhong Shu', 'Ji Zhong', 'Xuan Shu', 'Ming Men', 'Yang Guan', 'Yao Yu', and 'Chang Chiang'. The right brush emphasized on attacking the opponent's legs, like 'Zi Wu Shu', 'Wei Dao', 'Huan Tiao', 'Feng Shi', 'Zhong Du', and the calf's 'Yang Ling' Point. Zhang CuiShan figured out that his left brush really only aimed at the several points along the 'Du Artery'. The right brush aimed at only the several points in the front of the leg and foot. Despite the complicated appearance, it's actually quite easy to counter. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Master once said, the Green Dragon Sect's point-sealing technique relied on its oddity. So despite its ferociousness, their technique is nothing to worry about. Looks like master's correct." After he understood his opponent's attack pattern, the silver hook and iron brush only protected the particular points that Quan JianNan aimed for, ignoring all other parts of the body.

Quan JianNan fought with more and more energy as the battle went on. Zhang CuiShan thought, "You dare come to the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain with such pedestrian skills?" Suddenly his silver hook came scooping down using

the hook in the character 'Dragon'. The hook slashed through Quan JianNan's right leg's 'Feng Shi' Point. Quan JianNan let out a scream, and fell down.

At this moment, Zhang CuiShan's brush came straight down, sealing ten pressure points on Quan JianNan's 'Du Artery', the same ten Quan JianNan aimed with his left brush during the fight. This brush came down fast as a shooting star, strong as a charging ox, fully immobilizing Quan JianNan. Quan JianNan sighed, and thought, "I give up. Even against a wooden sculpture, I wouldn't be able to attack ten points in one single move. I'm not even worthy to be his disciple."

Zahng CuiShan put his hook by Quan JianNan's throat, and yelled, "Everyone stand back! After escorting this elder to Wu Dang Mountain, I'll release him." He thought these people must be Quan JianNan's subordinates, and would listen.

But instead, that colorfully-dressed married woman yelled, "Everyone attack together. Break the carts." Zhang CuiShan yelled, "If anyone moves any closer, I'll kill this man!" That woman smirked and said, "Everyone just attack." The riders immediately charged, ignoring Quan JianNan's safety. This woman is one of the helmsmen of the Three-River Clan. They came here to capture Yu LianZhou and Yin SuSu, in order to get Xie Xun's location. Quan JianNan is just a guest helper. So they hardly cared for his safety.

Zhang CuiShan gasped, as he realized that even killing Quan JianNan would be useless. At this moment, six people had surrounded Yin SuSu's cart, and six more surrounded Yu LianZhou's cart. The rest gathered around the married woman. Just at this moment, Yu LianZhou suddenly yelled, "Sixth brother, come get rid of these people!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "What's second brother doing?" When suddenly, he heard a yell in the distance, "Sure thing! Fifth brother, how are you? Your little brother really misses you." A shadow appeared from behind a nearby tree, with a sword in hand, coming closer. He is indeed the sixth hero Yin LiTing. Zhang CuiShan was simply overjoyed, and he yelled, "Sixth brother. Great to see you!"

Several people from the Three-River Clan went to block Yin LiTing's path, only to hear a continuous stream of 'ah' yells and 'ding ding' sounds. Each person's wrist was slashed by sword on the 'Divine Gate' Point. All of them immediately dropped their weapons. The 'Divine Gate' Point is located on the back wrist. Once struck, the hand immediately becomes numb, unable to exert any more pressure. Yin LiTing walked briskly towards the carts. When an enemy comes, he would wave his sword, and the opposing weapon would drop. That woman yelled, "You're Wu Dang's..." With two 'Dang Dang' sounds, her two sabers both left her hands.

Zhang CuiShan said ecstatically, "So master finally figured out the 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords'." This 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords' has a total of thirteen moves. Each one different from another, but all aimed at the opponent's 'Divine Gate' Point. When Zhang CuiShan left Wu Dang ten years ago, Zhang SanFeng had started to invent this sword art. He discussed with his disciples several times, but couldn't overcome several major problems. Now as Zhang CuiShan watched Yin LiTing use this sword art, no one in the Three-River Clan could block even one blow. Every single one of Yin LiTing's strike was incredibly exquisite. After only five or six blows, he had already dropped over ten people's weapons.

That woman yelled, "Let's get out of here!" The clan members immediately began to run away. Zhang CuiShan

unsealed Quan JianNan's pressure points and returned his brushes. Quan JianNan instantly ran away in a shameful expression.

Yin LiTing returned his sword to its sheath, and grabbed Zhang CuiShan's hands tightly. He said with joy, "Fifth brother. I missed you so much!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Sixth brother, you've grown taller." When they parted, Yin LiTing was only eighteen. After ten years, the young boy had grown into a mature adult. Zhang CuiShan held Yin LiTing's hand as he walked over to his wife.

Yin SuSu is still quite ill. So she could only smile lightly, and said faintly, "Sixth brother-in-law." Yin LiTing said with a smile, "So fifth sister-in-law also has a surname of 'Yin'. That's great. Not only are you my sister-in-law, but also my sister."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother really is much better than me. You were hiding on that tree the whole time. He recognized you, but I never noticed."

Yin LiTing then spoke of why he came.

A while back, fourth hero Zhang SongXi went down the Wu Dang Mountain to buy some items for master's one-hundredth birthday. He saw two suspicious people walking around, and thought, "Considering Wu Dang's fame, why would anyone want to cause trouble in this area?" So he followed them to see what they're up to. Only then did Zhang SongXi know that Zhang CuiShan is back, and met up with Yu LianZhou. Both the 'Three-River Clan' and the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' wanted to block their path, to ask for Xie Xun's location. Zhang SongXi ecstatically went back up the mountain. At the time, only Yin LiTing was there. The two split up to look for their brothers. They both thought, at the time, that their second and fifth brother could easily take

care of these people. But both were too impatient to meet up with their fifth brother. So they came down the mountain together. Neither knew about Yu LianZhou's injury, for those people did not bring it up. Zhang SongXi followed 'Saber of Five Winds Sect', while Yin LiTing followed 'Three-River Clan'.

Yu LianZhou said, "If it weren't for fourth brother, I don't know what would've happened today." Zhang CuiShan said shamefully, "I couldn't even protect second brother myself. After leaving for ten years, my martial arts ability had lagged too far behind." Yin LiTing said, "Don't be so hard on yourself. Even if I hadn't appeared, you still could've easily taken care of them. It's just that you couldn't protect second brother and fifth sister-in-law at the same time. Think about the techniques you used against that old man from Gao Li. Master never taught it to anyone else. Master will be overjoyed to see you back. He's bound to have lots and lots of stuff to teach you. Just hope you can remember them all. Hey, do you want me to teach you the 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords'?"

Due to their bond, and being reunited after so much time apart, Yin LiTing is just dying to teach Zhang CuiShan everything he missed. As the two walked side by side, Yin LiTing talked endlessly, and kept making gestures to demonstrate various techniques.

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That night the four rested in an inn. Yin LiTing wanted to sleep next to Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan also really likes this sixth brother. Although Yin LiTing's already grown up, his personality still resembled the youngster ten years ago. Muo ShengGu might be the youngest of the seven brothers, but he matured at a very young age. So Yin LiTing actually has a weaker personality than his little brother. Zhang CuiShan's

age has always been close to Yin LiTing's, and had always taken extra care of his sixth brother.

Yu LianZhou chuckled, and said, "Fifth brother is already married. Do you think he's still the same person from ten years ago? Fifth brother, you came back just in time. After we're done with master's birthday celebration, we will be following up with sixth brother's wedding celebration." Zhang CuiShan clapped his hands and laughed, said, "Awesome! Awesome! Who's the lucky lady?" Yin LiTing's face turned bright red, but won't speak.

Yu LianZhou said, "She is the daughter of 'Golden Whip' Old Hero Ji in Han Yang City." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Sixth brother, you need to stop acting like a kid now. It's no fun getting whacked by a golden whip." Yu LianZhou chuckled, said, "Miss Ji is actually a sword user. Thankfully, she was not among the hooded-women back at the river." Zhang CuiShan asked in surprise, "You mean Miss Ji is an E Mei disciple?" Yu LianZhou nodded, said, "Those E Mei disciples we met by the river had ordinary kung fu. So Miss Ji couldn't have been among them. Otherwise, if I offended sixth sister-in-law, while helping fifth sister-in-law, people might say I'm being unfair. This future sixth sister-in-law has great moral fiber, and excellent martial arts. She's a top disciple of a righteous sect, very suitable for sixth brother..."

When he got here, Yu LianZhou suddenly remembered that Yin SuSu is from an evil sect. Praising Miss Ji this way might hurt fifth brother's feelings. Just when he wanted to change the subject, someone came to the door and said, "Mr. Yu, several people want to see you. They said they're your friends." This was the voice of a worker at the inn.

Yu LianZhou asked, "Who are they?" The worker said, "There are six people total. They said they're from the 'Saber of Five

Winds Sect'." The three brothers were quite surprised. Zhang SongXi said he'd get rid of these people, so how did they manage to get here? Could something have happened to Zhang SongXi? Zhang CuiShan said, "Let me go out and see what's going on." Because of second brother's injuries, Zhang CuiShan didn't want to fight inside the room. Yu LianZhou said, "Let them come in."

A while later, five coarse men and a beautiful young married woman came in. Zhang CuiShan and Yin LiTing sat right next to Yu LianZhou, preparing for possible fighting. Yet these six people all had shameful expressions on their faces. None of them had any weapons. Hardly looking like they want to cause some trouble. The first man of about forty stepped up, bowed courteously with fists together, and said, "Are you Wu Dang's Second Hero Yu, Fifth Hero Zhang, and Sixth Hero Yin? I am a disciple of the Saber of Five Winds Sect, called Meng ZhengHong. Nice to meet you."

Yu, Zhang, and Yin returned bows, all surprised at his actions. Yu LianZhou said, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Meng. Everyone, please sit."

But Meng ZhengHong did not sit. He said, "My sect is located in the Shan Xi region. Although the sect is small, we nonetheless have heard of Wu Dang's reputation. Today, upon reaching the foot of Wu Dang Mountain, we really should go up to respects to Master Zhang. But we heard that he's already one hundred years old, and leads a quiet life. So we really shouldn't bother him. We wish you could send a message to him. Tell him that the disciples of the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' send their greetings, hoping he would have forever-good health, and many blessings."

Yu LianZhou said, "You are too kind. Thank you for your thoughtful words."

Meng ZhengHong then said, "We really were foolish and ignorant, to even dare come offend Wu Dang. Thankfully, the Heroes of Wu Dang were benevolent, and actually helped us out in our time of need. I really am very thankful, and therefore came to first express my gratitude, then express my apology. Hoping you could forgive us." As he spoke he got on his knees.

Zhang CuiShan quickly picked him up, said, "Mr. Meng, you don't need to be so courteous."

Meng ZhengHong stuttered a bit, as he wanted to say something, but was afraid to. Yu LianZhou said, "Just speak what's on your mind, Mr. Meng." Meng ZhengHong said, "I wish for Second Hero Yu to say that Wu Dang forgives us. So we would have face to meet our master." Yu LianZhou said, "I take it you came to seek Golden-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun's location, right? What's your reason for doing so?" Meng ZhengHong said, "Xie Xun killed my elder brother."

Yu LianZhou's heart shook, said, "We really have our reasons for not giving this info. Hopefully you can understand. As for forgiveness, you don't have to ever speak of it again. When you see your master Old Master Wu, say that Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, and Sixth Yin send their greetings."

Meng ZhengHon said, "If so, then we shall go now. If Wu Dang ever needs help in the future, you can simply send us a letter. Although we are just a small sect, we would still help in any way we can." He then bowed again with the five other people, and left the room.

That young married woman suddenly got down on her knees and whispered, "Thanks to Wu Dang's help, I was able to keep my innocence. I'll never forget your kindness." The

three brothers didn't know what she's talking about, but felt it would be inappropriate to ask further on this subject. So they just said some modest words. That young woman kowtowed several times, and left.

Just moments after these people left, the door opened. A man flew in at lightning speed, and immediately hugged Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan said cheerfully, "Fourth brother!" The person who came in was indeed Zhang SongXi. Zhang CuiShan added, "Fourth brother. You really are amazing. Turning the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' from enemy to friend. Zhang SongXi said with a smile, "It was just a coincidence. I can't really claim credit." He then explained how everything unfolded.

That young married woman's surname is Wu. She is the sect leader's second daughter. That Meng ZhengHong is her husband. The six of them came here to search for Xie Xun. On the way, they met up with the Three-River Clan, who said that Zhang CuiShan know of Xie Xun's location. That Wu lady was pampered since childhood. She proposed to capture Zhang CuiShan, and torture him into submission. Meng ZhengHong had always been afraid of his wife, but wouldn't agree with her this time. He said that Wu Dang's too powerful. They should instead ask politely. Should Wu Dang not acquiesce, they'll find some other way to get the information. That Wu lady said, "This is a once in a life time opportunity. Once Zhang CuiShan get back to Wu Dang, he'd be with his martial brothers, and be protected by Zhang SanFeng. How do we ask then?" The two then began to bicker. The other disciples were beneath them in seniority, and didn't dare interfere.

That Wu lady said, "You are such a coward. Look, we're trying

to avenge your brother here, not mine. Humph, you're not a man at all. Don't you have any courage? Even if that Zhang CuiShan tells you Xie Xun's location, I doubt you'll have the guts to find him. The biggest mistake of my life is getting married to a coward like you." Meng ZhengHong is used to giving in to his wife, and stopped talking. But he still won't follow his wife's plan: catching them using sleeping powder. In her frustration, that night when his husband fell asleep, the Wu lady secretly left.

She wanted to do the deed alone, and embarrass his husband in the process. Unfortunately for her, a helmsman of the Three-River Clan saw everything. Lusted at her beauty, he followed behind secretly. He tried to apply some of the sleeping powder on her. However, Zhang SongXi was following their movement this whole time. At the last second, he came out of hiding and beat up on that helmsman, before chasing him away. Zhang SongXi didn't say his own name, only mentioned that he was a Wu Dang disciple. The Wu lady was both surprised and embarrassed. She quickly went back and told her husband what happened. This way, Wu Dang turned into their savior. That's why the couple came to thank the three Wu Dang brothers. Zhang SongXi didn't want to further embarrass them, and therefore didn't appear until they had left.

Zhang CuiShan said, "It's not difficult to send these people away. But it's much more to master's taste that you turned them into friends."

Zhang SongXi said with a smile, "Ten years apart, and the first thing you do is to flatter me."

That night, the four brothers slept in the same room and chatted. Despite his cleverness, Zhang SongXi could not figure out the origins of the man who kidnapped Wuji either.

The next day, Zhang SongXi met Yin SuSu. The five of them traveled for a whole day before arriving at Wu Dang Mountain that night.

As he returned to his childhood home, Zhang CuiShan's first thought was to pay respects to his master. Then meet up with eldest brother, third brother, and seventh brother. Even though his son is missing and his wife is sick, Zhang CuiShan nonetheless felt more happiness and sadness.

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Upon reaching the mountaintop, they saw eight horses tied by the front door. These horses don't belong to Wu Dang. Zhang SongXi said, "There must be guests here. Let's not bother them, and use the side door instead." Zhang CuiShan held his wife and walked through the side door. When the priests and servants saw Zhang CuiShan back safely, they were all overjoyed. Zhang CuiShan really wanted to see his master. But the apprentice priest for Zhang SanFeng said that he's still meditating in seclusion. Zhang CuiShan paid his respect in front of Zhang SanFeng's meditation room. Then went to see Yu DaiYan.

The apprentice priest who served Yu DaiYan whispered, "Third Martial Uncle's asleep. Do you want to wake him up?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, and walked into the room. Only to see Yu DaiYan sleeping soundly, with pale face and sunken cheeks. A righteous hero ten years ago, had turned into a sick man seemingly on his last breath. Zhang CuiShan watched for a while, and tears came down his eyes.

After a long time, he finally walked out, and asked the apprentice priest, "Where's your eldest and seventh martial uncles?" That apprentice priest said, "In the main hall."

Zhang CuiShan walked to the back room of the main hall to wait for them. After a long time, they still haven't appeared. Zhang CuiShan finally asked the servant sending the tea, "Who are the guests?" That servant said, "They seem to be in the escort agency business."

Yin LiTing wanted to be with his long lost brother, and soon joined Zhang CuiShan. When Zhang CuiShan asked him about those guests, Yin LiTing said, "All three are top agency leaders. 'Tiger Den Escort Agency' Leader Qi TianBiao from Jin Lian City, 'Rising Sun Escort Agency' Leader Yun He from Tai Yuan City, and the third is 'Sparrow Cloud Escort Agency' Leader Guan Jiujia from the capital city."

Zhang CuiShan said with surprise, "All three of them came? Ten years ago, these are the most renowned escort agencies in the country. And their leaders have the best martial arts among escort leaders. Is that still true today? Why are they here?" Yin LiTing said with a smile, "They probably lost some shipments on one of their escort trips. The person who took their shipments is too powerful. So they came to ask big brother for help. Fifth brother, big brother has been helping more and more people recently. Every time someone has an unsolvable problem in the martial world, he'd ask for big brother's help."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Big brother has a heart of Buddha. He never turns down anyone's request. I wonder if big brother looks older now?" Unable to further suppress his urge to see his big brother, Zhang CuiShan said, "Sixth brother, I'm going behind the screen to take a peek at him, ok?" He walked up and peeked into the main hall.

Only to see Song YuanQiao and Muo ShengGu sitting in two host seats. Song YuanQiao dressed as a priest, with a peaceful expression on his face. He looked similar to ten

years ago, except there are some gray hairs on the side, and he looked chubbier. Song YuanQiao is not a priest. But since his master is a priest, and Wu Dang is a place of worship, he tends to wear a priest robe on Wu Dang Mountain. Muo ShengGu had already grown into an adult. Although only twenty-some years old, he had grown a long beard, and looked even older than Zhang CuiShan.

Only to hear Muo ShengGu say loudly, “My big brother is a man of his words. Are you saying that you don’t trust his reputation?” Zhang CuiShan thought, “Seventh brother’s temper hasn’t changed at all. I wonder what he’s arguing about?” He turned and looked at the guest seats. Three people sat there, each about fifty years old. One looked very fiery. One is tall and skinny, looking composed. The third one looked terribly sick, his face seemingly a dry root. Only to hear the tall thin man say, “Of course we trust Hero Song’s words. But can you tell us when Fifth Hero Zhang would be back?”

Zhang CuiShan thought, “So they came for me. Probably seeking my sworn brother’s location.” Only to hear Muo ShengGu say, “We seven brothers might not have great abilities, but we are proud of our righteous deeds. We thank our friends in the martial world for giving us the ‘Seven Heroes of Wu Dang’ title. Although we don’t really deserve it...” Zhang CuiShan thought, “After ten years, seventh brother’s much better at talking now. When I left, he would take forever answering questions from strangers. Other than third brother and I, everyone else has improved dramatically.”

Muo ShengGu continued, “but we have indeed been bestowed this honor. Due to our master’s teachings, none of us dared make any mistake. Fifth Brother Zhang is one of my brothers. Among us, he has the best temper. If you keep

saying that he killed those people at the 'Dragon Gate Escort Agency', Humph, that's just nonsense." Zhang CuiShan shuddered, "So it's about the Dragon Gate Escort Agency again. Looks like they've heard about me coming back, and came to question me on the matter."

That fiery old man said, "No one questions the reputation of 'The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang'. Seventh Hero Muo, you didn't need to self-praise to tell us of your incredible fame."

Muo ShengGu frowned at his sarcastic remark, said, "What do you really want, Leader Qi? Just go ahead and say it."

That fiery man is indeed the leader of the 'Tiger Den Escort Agency', Qi TianBiao. Qi TianBiao said loudly, "The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are men of their words. So did Shaolin Reverends lie? Shaolin monks personally saw Zhang CuiShan, Fifth 'Hero'... Zhang, killed every member of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." He purposely emphasized the word 'hero', and said it in a mocking tone.

Yin LiTing was furious. Ridiculing his fifth brother is ten times more unbearable than mocking Yin LiTing himself. He was just about to go out and argue, when Zhang CuiShan pulled him back, and shook his head. Yin LiTing saw a painful expression on his face. He didn't know what to make of it, but thought, "Fifth brother's temper is so great. No wonder master always compliments him."

Muo ShengGu stood up, and said loudly, "First of all, my fifth brother is currently not here. But even if he were, my answer is still the same. Zhang CuiShan and I are brothers in life and death. His problems are my problems. You have to falsely accuse my fifth brother on this murder charge? Fine! Just put it all on me. If you want revenge, come to me. My fifth brother is not here, but Muo ShengGu is also Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan is also Muo ShengGu. To be honest, my kung fu and intellect are both beneath my fifth brother. So you are quite lucky to meet me today.”

Qi TianBiao fumed, stood up and yelled, “Before coming to Wu Dang, many people laughed at me. They said that my kung fu was not worthy of challenging Wu Dang. But there’s no way we can simply forget what happened to Du Dajin and his people. After killing over Dragon Gate Escort Agency’s ninety-plus people, I’m sure Wu Dang won’t mind killing another Qi TianBiao. Looks like I will be dying on Wu Dang Mountain today. When we came up the mountain, out of respect for you, we carried no weapons. So I’ll seek my death under Seventh Hero Muo’s fists.” As he spoke, he walked to the center of the room.

Song YuanQiao had been quiet this whole time, but he stepped in at this moment, and held back Muo ShengGu. With a light smile, Song YuanQiao said, “Let’s look at the purpose of your visit. You came because you are certain that my fifth brother killed everyone in Lin An City’s Dragon Gate Escort Agency. Good news is, he will be back soon. Why don’t the three guests be a bit patient, wait till he’s actually back. Then wouldn’t the truth be revealed?”

That sick-looking old man, ‘Sparrow Cloud Escort Agency’ Leader Gong JiuGui, stood up and said, “Escort Leader Qi, please sit down. Since Fifth Zhang has still not returned, we can’t get a resolution. How about we first see Master Zhang, and ask his opinion. As the most esteemed individual in the martial world, surely he would be objective, and not just shield his own disciple.”

Despite his courteous tone, these words carried a threatening message. Muo ShengGu said, “Our master’s in seclusion right now for meditation. Besides, my big brother handles most of

the Wu Dang matters now anyway. Other than some of the most highly esteemed individuals of the martial world, my master would not greet any guest.” In another words, he meant that the three escort leaders were not worthy of meeting their master.

That tall skinny man, Escort Leader Yun He, said, “Humph, what are the odds. So your master just happened to be meditating the same day we come, eh? Well, Master Zhang can meditate in seclusion whenever he wants. But does he think that by hiding, he can avoid the payment for the ninety-plus lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency?” Gong JiuGui realized that these words were too nasty, and quickly gestured for him to stop. But Muo ShengGu could not hold down his rage. He yelled, “Are you saying that my master’s hiding from you?” Yun He smirked, but did not respond.

Despite his good temper, Song YuanQiao could not bear these people mocking his master. No one in over ten years had dared to mock Zhang SanFeng in front of the Wu Dang heroes. Song YuanQiao said calmly, “Since the three are guests, we dare not offend you. However, I must ask you to leave now!” And with these words he whisked his sleeve. A light wind left the sleeve. The three teacups by Qi TianBiao, Yun He, and Gong JiuGui were swept by the wind, and flew onto the tea table besides Song YuanQiao. The three cups flew up leisurely, and landed evenly. Not a single drop of tea came out in the process.

The three escort leaders, at the moment Song YuanQiao whisked his sleeve, felt a seemingly soft, but actually powerful force pushing into their chests. The force was so dominating they couldn’t even breathe. The three immediately started to gather their inner chi in defense. But the soft wind came quickly, and left quickly, as they regained the ability to breathe again. The escort leaders were

incredibly shocked. They knew that had Song YuanQiao followed up with a whisk of his left sleeve, the second wave of wind would have reversed the chi-flow that they gathered. Even if they don't die from the reversed chi-flow, at least their inner power would be destroyed. From this one act, the three escort leaders realized that the soft-spoken eldest hero of Wu Dang has unbelievable martial arts.

In the back room, Zhang CuiShan thought about Yin SuSu's murder of Dragon Gate Escort Agency again. He felt very remorseful about the act. When he suddenly saw Song YuanQiao's whisk of the sleeve, Zhang CuiShan felt awed, and thought, "Wu Dang inner power really does grow quicker the more the practitioner trains. When my sworn brother wanted to kill big brother, big brother really had no chance. But today, even if my sworn brother weren't blind, his martial arts wouldn't be much better than big brother's, if at all. In another ten years, my big and second brother should surpass my sworn brother."

Only to hear Qi TianBiao say, "Thank you, Hero Song, for sparing our lives. Goodbye!" Song YuanQiao and Muo ShengGu sent them out the door. Qi TianBiao said, "No need see us out." Song YuanQiao said, "It's not often that such renowned escort leaders would visit Wu Dang. Why shouldn't we escort you out? In the future, I'll surely visit your agencies should I get the chance." Qi TianBiao said, "Oh, you are too kind." After Song YuanQiao showed off his martial prowess, his demeanor remained the same, with no arrogance. Qi TianBiao gained a lot more respect for this eldest Wu Dang hero, and had lost most of his urge for revenge.

At this moment, Qi TianBiao suddenly saw a short but gallant looking man walk in the front door. Song YuanQiao said, "Fourth brother, let me introduce you to these guests." He then introduced everyone.

Zhang SongXi said, "The three came just in time. I have some items you might wish to see." And he took out three small packets, and gave one to each person. Qi TianBiao asked, "What are these?" Zhang SongXi said, "This is not a good place to open them. You should look at the contents outside." The three Wu Dang brothers then escorted the guests out the door.

Immediately afterwards, Muo ShengGu asked impatiently, "Fourth brother, where's fifth brother? Did he not come back with you?" Zhang SongXi said, "Go back inside to see your fifth brother. Your big brother and I will wait for these three guests to return." Muo ShengGu yelled, "Fifth brother's inside? These three escort leaders are coming back? What do we do then?" In his haste to see Zhang CuiShan, Muo ShengGu didn't even wait for Zhang SongXi's explanation, and hurriedly inside.

Just as he went back to the main hall, the three escort leaders really did return. They immediately bowed to Zhang SongXi and Song YuanQiao, who quickly returned bows. Yun He said, "I finally know now that the Wu Dang heroes were my saviors. To think that I derided your Master Zhang... I feel incredibly ashamed." As he spoke, Yun He picked up his hands, and slapped himself on the face ten times, until his face is pure red. Song YuanQiao doesn't know what's going on, and quickly stopped him.

Zhang SongXi said, "Escort Leader Yun is a true loyalist of China. All patriotic Chinese wish to get rid of those Mongols, and return China to its rightful owner. Helping in this regards is what people like us should do. No need to say thanks."

Yun He said, "You saved my whole family, and everyone in my escort agency. To think that I had no clue these last five

years. I really hope you two can hit me a few times, to lessen my emotional embarrassment.”

Zhang SongXi said with a smile, “Don’t worry too much about the past. Out of respect for your actions, I’m sure even master would not mind those words you just said.” But even so, Yun He still felt uneasy.

Song YuanQiao doesn’t know what’s going on, and simply said a few courteous words. Qi TianBiao and Gong JiuGui also thanked profusely, but Zhang SongXi didn’t seem to care much for them. He only had kind words to say for Yun He. The three escort leaders insisted on paying respects to Zhang SanFeng. They each bowed in front of Zhang SanFeng’s meditation room. Then insisted to see Muo ShengGu to apologize. After more apologies and words of thanks, the three finally left.

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Afterwards, Zhang SongXi said, “Although they feel indebted to us, none of them spoke about the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. Looks like we still can’t resolve this issue.”

Song YuanQiao was about to ask what’s going on, when Zhang CuiShan came out from the back room. He yelled, “Big brother, I missed you so much.”

Song YuanQiao is a very mannerly person. So even though he’s meeting his long lost brother, and felt exuberant in his head, Song YuanQiao nonetheless simply bowed courteously, and said, “Fifth brother. You’ve finally come back.”

Before Zhang CuiShan could respond, Muo ShengGu asked impatiently, “Fifth brother. Didn’t you hear how rude those people are? You really do have a good temper. I would’ve

taught them a lesson.” Zhang CuiShan sighed, and said, “It’s a long story. After I tell you all, we really should try to seek an effective solution together.”

Yin LiTing said, “Don’t worry, fifth brother. The Dragon Gate Escort Agency failed in their duty to escort third brother safely back. Even if fifth brother really did kill them all, it would be because of your love for third brother, and so wouldn’t be that...”

Yu LianZhou yelled, “Sixth brother, are kind of nonsense are you speaking? If master hears these words, he’d lock you up for at least a month to repent. How can any of us kill a whole agency, including the elderly and the children?”

The other brothers all looked at Zhang CuiShan. All saw the solemn expression on his face. After a while, Zhang CuiShan said, “I didn’t kill anyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. I didn’t forget master’s teachings.”

Song YuanQiao and his fellow brothers all breathed a sigh of relief. They didn’t really believe that Zhang CuiShan could do such a thing. But Shaolin was just so adamant about it, even said that they witnessed the whole event. And when the three escort leaders came to question him, Zhang CuiShan did not speak up and claim his innocence. So all the brothers felt some uneasiness. Only when Zhang CuiShan spoke these words did they finally put to rest these nagging thoughts. They all thought, “There must be some problematic details that will make this hard to resolve. But as long as he didn’t kill them, everything will eventually be ok.”

With this thought, Muo ShengGu asked why those three escort leaders returned. Zhang SongXi said, “Among these three leaders, Yun He’s character is the best. Using his fame, Yun He helped organized many people in his region to rise

against the Mongol government.” The other brothers immediately expressed their admiration for his actions.

Muo ShengGu said, “Never thought he’d some this type of a person. Hold your story until I come back...” As he spoke, Muo ShengGu quickly ran out the room.

Zhang SongXi stopped talking, and they asked Zhang CuiShan about Fire-Ice Island. When Zhang CuiShan spoke about the six months of mostly daylight, six months of mostly night, everyone gasped in astonishment. Zhang CuiShan said, “It’s hard to tell the directions on that island. The sun doesn’t exactly rise in the east.” He then talked about the different strange plants and animals on the island.

Muo ShengGu came back in the midst of his tale, said, “I went to apologize to Escort Leader Yun. Told him I respect him as an upright man.” Everyone knew this little brother’s straightforward temper, and had long figured that this was his reason for leaving.

Yin LiTing said, “Seventh brother. Fourth brother held off his tale for you. But fifth brother’s story about the Fire-Ice Island is even more exciting.” Muo ShengGu jumped up and said, “Really?” Zhang SongXi said, “Yun He had prepared everything in detail...” Muo ShengGu shook his hand, said, “Fourth brother. Terribly sorry, but can you hold on a moment...” Zhang CuiShan chuckled, and said, “Seventh brother doesn’t want to miss out on anything.” So he repeated his tale about the Fire-Ice Island. Afterwards, Muo ShengGu said, “Odd, so odd! Fourth brother, you can speak now.”

Zhang SongXi said, “Yun He prepared everything in detail. At the right moment, he’d start the rebellion. But a major participant was a traitor. Three days before the rebellion

would start, this traitor took the list of rebel names to the government.”

Muo ShengGu yelled, “Oh, no!”

Zhang SongXi said, “There was some coincidence involved. I had a beef with the mayor of his home city Tai Yuan. That night when I entered the mayor’s mansion, I saw that traitor and the mayor having a secret discussion. I heard their plan to give this info to the national government, and to put down the rebellion using troops. So I went into their room and killed both people. Then took the list of names and returned to Wu Dang. When they found the list of names missing, Yun He and his cohorts knew how terrible the consequences would be. Not only can they not start the rebellion now, but every person on that list would in grave danger. They wanted to send a message to all people involved, but the city gate was closed for the night already. The next morning, the city gate remained closed due to the mayor’s assassination. Yun He and his cohorts were sweating out the situation, as their crime would mean execution of their families, plus the families of their friends on the list. But as the days passed, everything remained fine. Since the police could not capture the assassin, this whole thing eventually passed away. When Yun He found out that the traitor died in the mayor’s mansion, he thought that someone helped him. But didn’t realize it was me.

Yin LiTing said, “I bet you gave him the list of names in that packet, right?” Zhang SongXi said, “That’s correct.”

Muo ShengGu said, “What about Gong JiuGui? How did you help him?”

Zhang SongXi said, “Gong JiuGui’s kung fu is certainly quite formidable, but his character’s not nearly as good as Yun He.

Six years ago, he escorted a shipment to the Yun Nan province. At the city of Kun Ming, he took an order of jewelry worth about six hundred thousand taels of silver. Which he needed to escort back to the capital city of Da Du. But he encountered a problem in the Jiang Xi Province. When passing by the city of Po Yang, three of the 'Four Brothers of Po Yang' attacked him, and took his jewelry. Not even Gong JiuGui's entire fortune comes close to the worth of these jewels. Besides, this failed delivery would surely destroy his reputation. After pondering for a while in the inn, he wanted to commit suicide.

“‘The Four Brothers of Po Yang’ are certainly not bandits. So why did they take these jewels? You see, the eldest brother got in trouble with the law, and landed on death row in prison. About to be executed, his three brothers tried twice to bust him out of prison. They failed both times, and the prison became even more closely guarded. Knowing that officials are corrupt, the three brothers wanted to bribe them using this jewelry, to lessen their big brother's crimes. I was moved by their friendship, and helped sneak their big brother out of prison. In return, I asked them to give Gong JiuGui his jewelry. Gong JiuGui might not be the greatest person in the world, but haven't really done anything bad in his life. He didn't befriend any officials in Da Du, nor ever oppress the poor. So I figured his life was worth saving. I told ‘The Four Brothers of Po Yang’ not to mention my name, just leave me the jewelry bag. So when I handed him the bag, Gong JiuGui understood what had happened.”

Yu LianZhou said, “You did the right thing, fourth brother.”

Muo ShengGu said, “Fourth brother, what did you give Qi TianBiao?” Zhang SongXi said, “I gave him nine ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Darts’.” The five listeners all gasped. ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Dart’ is very famous in the martial

world. It's the hidden weapon used by the rich aristocrat Wu YiMang.

Zhang SongXi said, "Thinking back, I was too reckless when I dealt with this situation. That day, while Qi TianBiao was escorting a shipment, he offended a disciple of Wu YiMang. The two fought, with Qi TianBiao seriously injuring that disciple with a punch. Qi TianBiao immediately realized that he's in trouble after landing this punch. So he quickly completed the shipment, and hurriedly back to his hometown Jin Ling, where he can ask several friends for help. But unfortunately, Wu YiMang caught him up at Luo Yang city, and challenged him to a duel at the city's western gate." Yin LiTing said, "Wu YiMang's kung fu is very good. Qi BiaoTing is not his match."

Zhang SongXi said, "You're right. Qi TianBiao knew this too. So he asked the Qiao brothers of Luo Yang to help him. The Qiao brothers agreed immediately, and said, 'You should know that with our kung fu ability, we are no match for Wu YiMang. So you just want us there for support. Don't worry, we will arrive on time.'"

Muo ShengGu said, "The Qiao brothers are hidden weapon experts. With their help, three against one, they might have a chance. But did Wu YiMang get any help?"

Zhang SongXi said, "No. But something happened to the Qiao brothers. The next morning, Qi TianBiao went to the Qiao brothers' house to discuss battle plans. But the servant said that the brothers had left town for an emergency. Qi TianBiao was furious. Several years before, Qi TianBiao helped the brothers out of a major dilemma. He didn't expect these brothers to sneak away during his moment of need. Knowing Wu YiMang's merciless ways, Qi TianBiao knew he would not survive this encounter. He wrote a will and gave it

to a subordinate. Then went to the west gate for the appointment.”

“Of course, I saw everything. So that day I disguised myself as a beggar, and sat under a tree outside the west gate. Wu YiMang and Qi TianBiao came one after the other. Soon after they started fighting, Wu YiMang used his ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Dart’. Qi TianBiao knew he couldn’t evade it, and simply closed his eyes to wait for death. I swooped in at this moment, and caught the dart. Wu YiMang was shocked and furious. He asked if I were a member of the Beggar’s Clan. I just smiled in silence. He then fired eight more darts. I caught every single one. His darts really were quite powerful. But if I had used Wu Dang skills, catching them would still be easy. However, I didn’t want him to know who I am. So I pretended to have a crippled left leg and right arm. Then using only my left hand, I caught them all using Shaolin skills. The seventh dart was a really close call, as the tip narrowly missed my palm. Wu YiMang really did thought I was a Shaolin disciple, and asked which divine reverend was my master. I pretended to be a deaf-mute, and just muttered some nonsensical stuff. Knowing that he couldn’t defeat me, Wu YiMang went away angrily. He never left home after that event.”

Muo ShengGu shook his head and said, “Fourth brother, Wu YiMang might be a bad guy, but Qi TianBiao isn’t a good guy either. Why did you risk saving him?”

Zhang SongXi said, “I was just felt nosy at the time. Besides, I also didn’t know the prowess of Wu YiMang’s darts.”

Being a straightforward person, Muo ShengGu didn’t figure out Zhang SongXi’s reasoning. But Zhang CuiShan did so immediately. His fourth brother did all this to lessen the hatred for him, due to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency

murder. Zhang SongXi knew the importance of these three escort leaders. Should there ever be any problems with the escort agencies, these three people would surely represent them. So Zhang SongXi purposely helped them beforehand in case of an event like this. Despite looking like 'coincidences', Zhang SongXi must've spent countless hours waiting for these events to occur.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Fourth brother, you and I are closer than blood brothers. I won't need to say the word 'thanks' to you. This whole incident, unfortunately, was all caused by your fifth sister-in-law." Then he told what exactly happened at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency that night. At the end, he said, "Fourth brother, do you know how we should resolve this?"

Zhang SongXi thought for a while, then said, "I have to ask the master first. But we can't bring the dead back alive. Fifth sister-in-law has also changed her ways. A person who has corrected his mistakes should be given a second chance. Big brother, don't you think so too?"

Song YuanQiao hesitated a moment, due to the severity of a ninety-plus murder case. But Yu LianZhou nodded and said, "I agree!"

Yin LiTing was most afraid of second brother. He knew that big brother has a soft heart, and can be easily persuaded. But second brother is cold and objective, and might be too harsh on fifth sister-in-law. Yin LiTing didn't know that Yu LianZhou had already heard this story. He had long forgiven Yin SuSu. Seeing his second brother's nod, Yin LiTing said happily, "Yeah, if others ask. Fifth brother can just say that he wasn't the murderer, and nothing else. He wouldn't be lying this way either." Song YuanQiao said in a scolding tone, "How could fifth brother purposely hide the truth like that? This is

not an option.” Yin LiTing asked, “Then what do we do?”

Song YuanQiao said, “In my opinion, after master’s birthday. We should first find fifth brother’s son. Then we’ll have the gathering at the Yellow Crane Restaurant. After taking care of the Xie Xun issue, us six brothers, plus fifth sister-in-law, will go down to the south. Each of us will do ten good deeds within three years.” Zhang SongXi said, “Good idea. If we could save one or two hundred people, we can partially make up for these deaths.” Yu LianZhou said, “I like this idea. There’s no point in further punishing fifth sister-in-law. Even her death wouldn’t solve any problem.”

Zhang CuiShan was exhilarated at the solution. He said, “Let me tell SuSu.” He then told his wife what Song YuanQiao proposed, and that his brothers would look for Wuji after their master’s birthday.

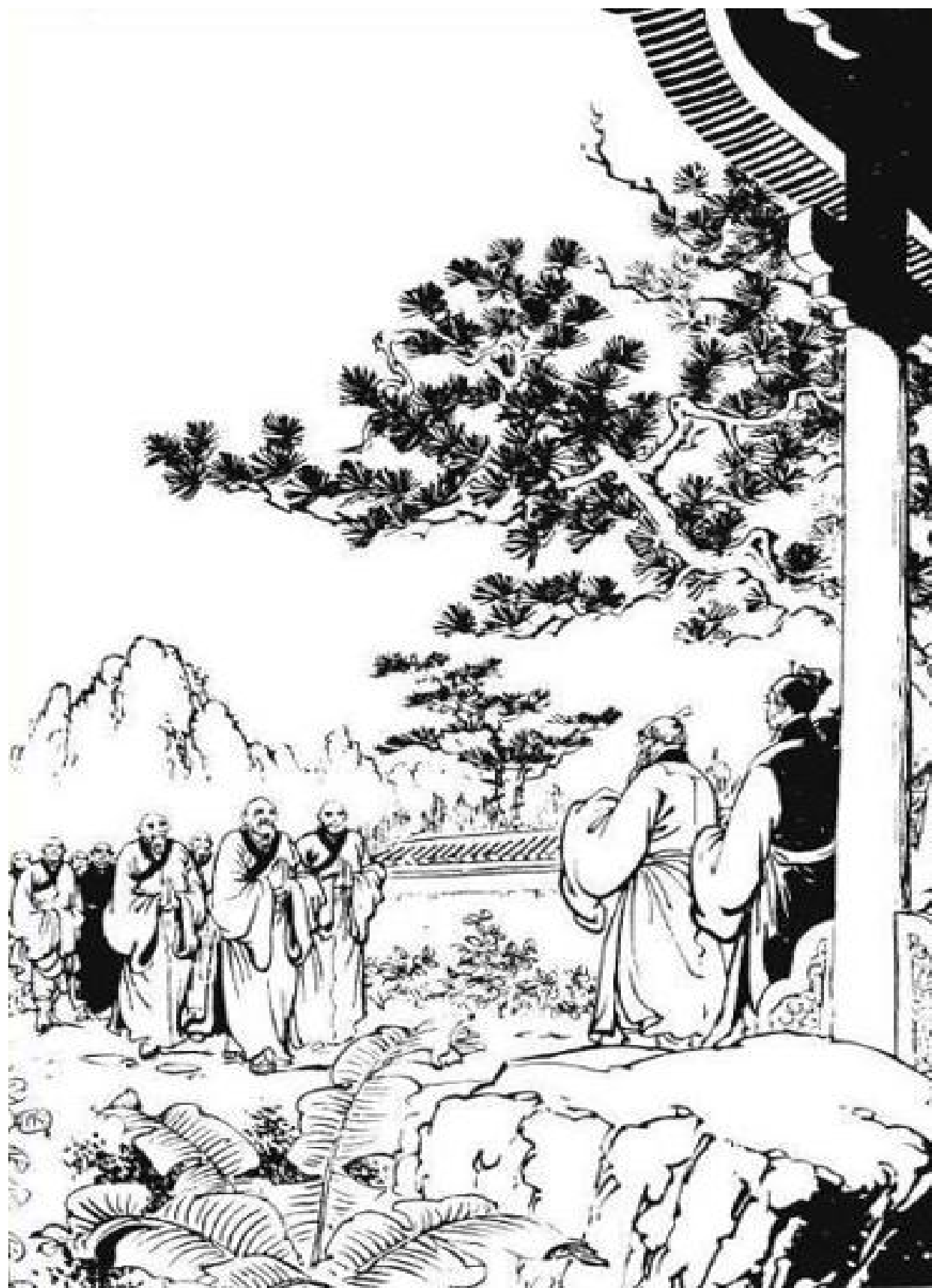
Yin SuSu’s illness was due to the loss of Wuji anyway. So these words settled her down a great deal. She thought that with the Six Heroes of Wu Dang’s abilities, they could surely find Wuji.

Zhang CuiShan then went to see Yu DaiYan. The brothers both felt joy and sadness as they reunited.

End of Chapter 9

Chapter 10 - Hundred Years Celebration Brings Heartbreak

(Translated by Faerie Queen and dgfds01)



The three monks Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin. Aside from Reverend Kong Jian who has died, the other three Reverends has all arrived here today.

After the passage of a few days, it was already the eighth day of the fourth month. Tomorrow will be Zhang SanFeng's one hundredth year birthday and he knew that his disciples most definitely would have prepared a festive celebration. Because Yu DaiYan was crippled and Zhang CuiShan was missing, there would undoubtedly be lack amongst their celebration. Yet, in one's time, to be able to celebrate your one hundredth birthday was nevertheless considered as something special. Furthermore, during this period, he has also entered isolated meditation in order to study the practice of the "Tai Chi Skill" and had already fully comprehended its true essence. From now on, the sect of Wu Dang can fully exhibit its colours within the martial arts world, not being inferior to even the martial arts of Shaolin that was passed down from Northern India's DaMo. Therefore during the early dawn of that morning, Zhang SanFeng exited from his isolation.

A clear whistling sound was heard as his sleeve fluttered slightly and the two door boards opened up with an "ah" sound. The first thing that Zhang SanFeng saw wasn't anything or anybody else, but was rather the disciple he had thought and yearned for endlessly during the last ten years, Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang SanFeng closed his eyes, believing that his eyes must have played a trick on him. But Zhang CuiShan had already thrown himself into Zhang SanFeng's embrace, repeatedly crying out the words, "Master!" In the midst of his emotional

state, he had actually forgotten to kneel down and perform obeisance. Five joyful voices coming from Song YuanQiao and the others cried out together, "Congratulations master! Fifth brother has returned to us!"

Zhang SanFeng has lived a total of one hundred years and has seek enlightenment for more than eighty years now. The clarity of pure truth had long existed within the depths of his heart, for he has long ago forsaken all traces of longing or desire for the millions of material objects of the world. But the love he shared with his seven disciples was as genuine as that of a father and son, thus when he suddenly saw Zhang CuiShan reappear in front of him, he couldn't help himself from holding him tightly within his embrace. He was so overwhelmed with joy that tears emerged from his eyes.

The group of brothers all attended to their Master, serving him in his grooming and cleansing, bringing him a clean set of clothing. Zhang CuiShan did not dare to report any sort of news that would excite anger, and therefore only talked about the exotic adventures and rare entities of the Ice-Fire Island. Zhang SanFeng having heard that Zhang CuiShan had already married became even more joyful and asked, "Where is your wife now? Quickly bring her here to see me."

Zhang CuiShan knelt down on the floor and said, "Master, your worthless disciple has dared to take a wife without first gaining your permission." Zhang SanFeng stroked his beard and laughingly replied, "You were stranded on the Ice-Fire Island for ten years, unable to return home. Are you suppose to wait ten years and reported to me before you could take a wife? What a silly, silly assertion! Quickly get up, there is no need to admit to any wrong. Zhang SanFeng does not have such a old-fashioned disciple." Zhang CuiShan continued to kneel, refusing to get up, "But my wife is not of an orthodox background. She ... she is the daughter of Heavenly Eagle

sect's sect-leader."

Zhang SanFeng continues to stroke his beard and said with a laugh, "And what matter is that? As long as your wife's character is honest and her heart is good, then that is all that matters. Even if she is not a good person, having arrived here at our mountain, can we not slowly change and guide her towards good? So what if she is from the Heavenly Eagle sect? CuiShan, you have to understand that in life one should always take caution to never have a heart that is too restricted in breadth. You must never look down on others just because you reside in the position of the so-called orthodox sects. The two words of "good" and "evil" were originally hard to differentiate. A member of the orthodox sect when harbouring thoughts of impurity and immorality will be considered as a wicked villain, and similarly if a member from the evil sect harbours a heart that is completely directed towards goodness, then that person is a gentleman." Zhang CuiShan was overjoyed, for he never would have thought that the very burden which had weighted heavily upon his heart for the last ten years could be so easily resolved by just a few words from his master. A beaming smile immediately lighted up Zhang CuiShan's face as he stood up.

Zhang SanFeng continued to say, "Your father-in-law, sect-master Yin is a person whom I have wanted to make acquaintances with for very long now. I am truly respectful towards his powerful martial arts and the fact that he is a brave, forthright and extraordinary man. Although his character is somewhat extreme and his actions may be a bit peculiar, yet he is not a despicable scoundrel. We can certainly make friends with him." Song YuanQiao and the others thought to themselves, "Master really does treat fifth brother with profound love. He even went as far as extending his love towards all those under brother's roof, willing to

make acquaintances with a big demonic lord like his father-in-law." At this moment, a young Taoist apprentice came in and reported, "Heavenly Eagle sect's Sect-Master Yin has sent somebody here to deliver presents to Uncle Zhang."

Zhang SanFeng said with a smile, "Your father-in-law has sent you presents CuiSan, go out to receive your guests!" Zhang Cui Shan replied, "Yes."

Yin LiTing said, "I'm going with fifth brother." Zhang SongXi laughed and said, "But it's not Golden Whip Hero old master Jie who has sent the presents, why must you follow out with such haste?" Yin LiTing's face flushed a beet red while he continued to follow Zhang CuiShan outside.

Upon entering the main reception room, they saw two old men standing there dressed in the attire of a servant, with straight cloth hats. As soon as they saw Zhang CuiSan come out, they immediately rushed forward and knelt down together in an act of reverence while saying, "Young master, many blessings to you. We, your humble servants Yin WuFu, Yin WuLu bow down to you." Zhang CuiShan returned the greeting by raising his joined hands and saying, "Housekeepers, please do get up" while silently thinking to himself, "The names of these two servants are so strange. The typical servant is usually given a name that blesses the house by containing words along the lines of 'providence, well-being, blessings, opulence, longevity and happiness'. Why is it that these two people are called 'the un-blest', and the 'un-prosperous'?" Zhang CuiShan then subsequently noticed that on Yin WuFu's face was an extremely long scar left by a saber, stretching from the right corner of his forehead all the way downwards, passing over the tip of the nose and stopping at the far left corner of his lips. Yin WuLu's face on the other hand was filled with pockmarks. These two men looked to be more than fifty years old, their appearances

were extremely ugly and unpleasant.

Zhang CuiShan continued to say, "Are my father and mother-in-law well? I was originally planning to engage in a little preparation before your mistress and I immediately went to pay our respects to our honoured loved ones. But I never expected that father and mother would pay us a visit first, how can I be worthy of such generosity? The two of you must be extremely tired having travelled such a far distance, please take a seat and have a cup of tea." Yin WuFu and Yin WuLu did not dare to sit down, but only came forward and respectfully presented the checklist for the gifts while saying, "Our master and madam said to tell you that these are merely meagre and humble presents, we hope that young master can accept them with pleasure."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Thank you!" and opened the checklist of gifts. He was shocked to see that on the ten or so pieces of darkly coloured gold paper were listed a total of more than two hundred gifts. The first listed gift was "Exquisite jade lions - a pair," the second was "Emerald phoenix - a pair" and after the listings of an endless number of treasures was "High Grade Purple Wolf Drawing Brushes - one hundred pieces," "Imperial tributes, Tang dynasty ink - 20 slabs," "Xuan¹ paper made with Mulberry worm silk - a hundred sheets" "Top Quality Duan² Ink-Stones - 8 squares." Because the master of the Heavenly Eagle Sect heard that his honoured guest was well-versed in the art of writing, he thus sent over an extremely expensive pile of pens, ink, paper and ink stone. On top of that were clothes, shoes, crowns and belts. Yin WuFu turned around to exit the room, only to return with ten baggage carriers, every one of them carrying two loads balanced on a shoulder pole, which they placed to the sides of the room.

Zhang CuiShan was silently fretting to himself, "I grew up in a simple abode amongst the humble mountainous environment. What use do I have for these expensive gifts? Yet these gifts were bestowed by my father-in-law and brought here from afar, it would be too disrespectful if I don't accept it." Therefore he could only express words of gratitude and accept the gifts while saying "Your young mistress has contracted a slight illness through the arduous journey. Perhaps you can reside on the mountain for a few days before you see her?" Yin WuFu replied, "Master and madam are both extremely desirous to hear about young mistress, they commanded us to report back to them right away. If it is not too straining for young mistress, your humble servant I would like to request just one look at her and then we will retreat immediately."

Zhang CuiShan replied, "If that is the case, then please wait here for a moment" while he returned to his room and told his wife about the situation. Yin SuSu was extremely happy and briefly fixed her hair before going out to the smaller reception rooms to reunite with her two family members. While she asked about her father, mother and brother's well being, she also invited these two servants for a meal and some drinks. Afterwards, Yin WuFu and Yin WuLu asked their young master and mistress for the permission to leave.

Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "Father and mother-in-law sent us such generous gifts, I should really grant a hefty reward to these two people. Yet I'm afraid that even if I gathered together all the money on this mountain, its meagre sum would still be hardly worthy of a mention." Zhang CuiShan was by nature magnanimous and therefore does not take such matters to heart. With a laugh, he said instead, "Your young mistress has married a penniless master who can't afford to grant you any rewards. Housekeepers, please do excuse us." Yin WuFu replied, "Please do not say

such things young master. To have the opportunity to meet the fifth hero of Wu Dang is my greatest pleasure and is a honour worth much more than a reward of a thousand pounds of gold.” Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, “This housekeeper expresses and enunciates his words with such poetic eloquence, he seems to be a person with an academic background.” When they arrived at the median gates, Yin WuFu said, “Young master, please cease your steps here. We hope that you and young mistress will arrive to our home as soon as possible in order to lessen master and madam’s longing. The whole sect will also be anticipating the day when they can be granted with a glimpse of your charisma.” Zhang CuiShan laughed.

Yin WuLu said, “There is still one little thing that I need to report to you young master. When my brothers and I were delivering the presents to the mountain, we encountered three escorts gathered within an inn in the town of Xiang Yang. Amongst the conversation of these three men, there was mention of you.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Oh? What did they say?” Yin WuLu said, “one man said, ‘although we are much indebted to the seven heroes of Wu Dang, yet the seventy odd lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency cannot be forgotten just like that.’ The three of them decided that since they themselves cannot participate in this incident, they therefore wanted to go to the KaiFeng City’s Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions, Old hero Tan to stand out and dispute over this incident with you young master.” Zhang Cui Shan nodded his head and did not say anything.

Yin WuFu reached inside his pockets and took out three small flags which he then presented to Zhang Cui Shan with both hands and said, “When your humble servants overheard that these three escorts were daring to dig up on the land governed by the Earth God³, this incident is already considered as the business of our Heavenly Eagle Sect.”

As soon as he saw the three small flags, Zhang CuiShan could help but be taken back for he saw embroidered on one flag the head of a vivacious tiger, roaring fiercely towards the heavens while in a crouching position. It was obviously the flag that represented the “Crouching Tiger Escort Agency.” Embroidered on the second small flag was a white crane soaring through the clouds, which would naturally be the agency flag that symbolized the “JinYang Escort Agency” for the white crane amongst the white clouds symbolized the head escort Yun He⁴. As for the third small flag, there were nine swallows embroidered with gold thread, incorporating the word “Swallow” in “Cloud Swallow Escort Agency” and the “Nine” in their head escort Gong JiuJia’s⁵ name.

Zhang CuiShan asked with curiosity, “Why did you take their escort flags?” Yin WuFu replied, “Young master, you are the Heavenly Eagle sect’s honoured guest, who did Qi TianBiao and Gong JiuJia think they were? Especially since the seven heroes of Wu Dang has performed good deeds for them before, how dare they go to ask an old bloke such as the so-called “Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions” Tan RuiLai from the KaiFeng City to come and pester young master you? Is that not ridiculous? Therefore when we heard the three escorts’ offensive words of disrespect ...” Zhang CuiShan remarked, “Those words really can’t be considered as being particularly disrespectful.” Yin WuFu said, “Yes, but that is because young master you are so magnanimous and forgiving, such is something that others cannot compare with. But my brothers and I really could not restrain ourselves from taking care of those three escorts and seizing the escort flags of their agencies.”

Zhang CuiShan was greatly taken back as he thought about how people like Qi TianBiao were all lords that ruled over the

escort agencies of a region and who have long made a name for themselves within the martial arts world. Even though they can't be considered as great or ultimate figures of the martial arts world, yet they all had their own unique abilities. How can it be that the three servants of his father-in-law's household can calmly say with such ease that they have 'taken care of them'? However, even if Yin WuFu was just boasting for show, yet they were indeed able to obtain the three agencies' escort flags. Forget just taking it from right under their eyes, but even to steal it secretly would prove itself to be a hard task. Can it be that they used some kind of tranquilizing sedative or soporific incense at the inn to harm the three heads escorts? Thus he asked, "How were you able to obtain these three escort flags?"

Yin WuFu replied, "At that time, my second brother WuLu was the one who issued the challenge. We set up a time to meet with them at the Southern gates of Xiang Yang for a duel. It was the three of us up against the three of them. We've already stated before that if they lose, they must leave behind their escort flags and chop off one of their arms, while also promising to never step foot back into the Wu Bei Province for the rest of their lives." Zhang CuiShan was becoming increasingly perplexed as he listened, no longer did he dared to take the two servants in front of him lightly. He asked, "Then what happened?" Yin WuFu replied, "Nothing much. They just left behind their escort flags, severed their left arm and stated that they will not take one step back into the Wu Bei Province for the rest of their lives."

Zhang CuiShan was secretly frightened as he thought, "These Heavenly Eagle Sect members are much too vicious in their ways" while his eyebrows knotted together unconsciously. Yin WuLu said, "If young master you are displeased with your unworthy servants for issuing too light of a punishment, then we can immediately go after them to

finish the three of them off.” Zhang Cui Shan hurriedly insisted, “No! Not light at all. It’s severe enough already!” Yin WuFu said, “We also felt that because the purpose of our trip was to bring gifts to young master you, it is therefore a very wonderful and joyous event. If we killed any lives, it may ruin such a blessed event.” Zhang CuiShan said, “That’s right. How very thoughtful and considerate of you all. You just said that there were three of you who came, but where is that third person now?” Yin WuFu replied, “There is still another brother called Yin WuShou⁶. After we took care of the three escorts, we were worried that the Sacred Spear old fool Tan would finally hear of the news and would still dare to come forward and bother young master you, therefore Yin WuShou has gone to KaiFeng City. He asks your humble servant I to express his regards on his behalf.” After saying this, he knelt down to the floor and bowed.

Zhang CuiShan also gave a bow in return of the gesture and said, “That’s much too kind of him” while thinking to himself that this Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions Tan RuiLai’s name has always been well-known and respected for it has been almost forty years since he established a name for himself. Now because of him, Yin WuShou will go barging into the KaiFeng City. Regardless of whomever may be hurt, it will still cause him to be ridden with guilt. Thus he said, “I have long since heard the great name of the Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions, they say that old master Tan is a true gentleman. I would like to ask the two of you to please go to the KaiFeng City and to tell brother WuShou not to quarrel with old master Tan anymore incase the two sides get into an argument and subsequently start a fight, which I’m afraid will yield disasterous results.”

Yin WuLu smiled ever so faintly and said , “Young master, there’s no need to worry. That old fool Tan won’t dare to meddle with my youngest brother. When my brother tells him

not to stick his nose into this business, he will listen to his orders.” Zhang CuiShan murmured a “Really?” while silently asking himself how can this Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions Tan RuiLai possibly allow himself to be so easily bullied? Even if he may be an old man now, yet within the KaiFeng City, the Tan family has at least one or two dozen disciples who are highly skilled in martial arts, why would they be scared of a Yin WuShou? Yin WuFu could read the skeptical incredulity on Zhang CuiShan's face, therefore said, “The old bloke Tan was defeated by Yin WuShou twenty years ago, besides he also has some major discreditable information in our hands now. Please take care now young master.” The two of them then paid their final respects and departed.

Zhang CuiShan stood there clutching the three escort flags within his hands, debating for a moment. He originally wanted to send these two people to help him out in his search for Wuji's current whereabouts. But when he thought to how mentioning this incident to an outsider might prove to be unwise for although he did not place much importance on his own name, yet it would still no doubt affect his second brother's eminent reputation. Therefore he could only slowly tread back to his bedroom.

Yin SuSu was lying on the bed rereading through the checklist of presents, overwhelmed with gratitude at the love her parents had shown towards her. But when she thought to how at this moment, Wuji's whereabouts were still unknown, she was also overwhelmed with a burning heartache. When she saw her husband enter the room with an fretful expression, she immediately asked with alarm, “What's wrong?”

Zhang CuiShan asked, “What are the backgrounds of those three people WuFu, WuLu and WuShou?”

Yin SuSu has been married to her husband for ten years now, but because she knew that within his heart, there always existed discontent towards the Heavenly Eagle sect, she therefore purposely refrained from relating to him the details of her family and the sect's background. Similarly, Zhang CuiShan would never ask her. Now only when she heard her husband ask her himself, did she finally say, "Twenty years ago, these three people were actually great bandits that ruled over the Southwestern regions. But one time, they were surrounded by many powerful fighters all at once and knew that they were not going to be able to escape. At that time, my father happened to pass by and when he saw how in the midst of their hopeless battle, they still manage to uphold their integrity and refused to surrender, my father therefore lent out a helping hand and rescued them. The three of them originally had different surnames, so of course they weren't brothers. But in order to prove their gratefulness towards my father for saving their lives, they thus solemnly vowed that for their rest of their lives, they will act as his servant and will cast off their original names and change it to Yin WuFu, Yin WuLu and Yin WuShou instead. Ever since I was small, I would be very courteous towards them and dared not to treat or view them as real servants. My father told me that in terms of martial arts and fame, there probably would be few famed fighters of the martial arts world who could compete with them."

Zhang CuiShan nodded and said, "I see" before describing the incident of how they decapitated other people's right arm and seized another's escort flag. Yin SuSu's scowled and said, "Their intentions were originally good, but they don't understand that the disciples of the orthodox sects do things differently from the evil sects. CuiShan, I'm afraid that incident has caused you more trouble, I ... I really don't know what to do about this." After a sigh, she continued, "After we

find Wuji, I think we had better return to the Ice-Fire Island.” When she suddenly heard Yan LiTing call from outside the door, “Brother, come and flex your writing skills for us to write a pair of birthday celebratory phrases” he laughed before continuing, “Sister, don’t blame me for dragging brother away from you, but he is after all the ‘Iron Brush, Silver Hook.’”

That afternoon, the six brothers split up, supervising and giving commands to the culinary help, while the little Taoist apprentices cleaned around and decorated the whole Purple Paradise Hall. The celebratory words that Zhang CuiShan penned were also displayed within the main reception hall. Everywhere was filled with a celebratory atmosphere.

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During the early dawn of the next day, Song YuanQiao and his brothers all changed into a newly tailored set of clothing and were all just about to go and assist Yu DaiYan so that the seven of them could go to their master as a group to offer their birthday blessings, when suddenly an Taoist apprentice came in and presented a calling card. It was Song YuanQiao who took the invitation but Zhang SongXi’s eyes were quick and saw that written on the card were the words, “Ku Lun Sect students He TaiChong accompanied by his disciples wishes master Zhang longevity comparable with the mountains.” Zhang SongXi exclaimed with alarm, “The sect master of Kun Lun has personally come to celebrate master’s birthday? When did he arrive in the Central Plains?” Muo ShengGu asked, “Did Madam He come as well?” He TaiChong’s wife Ban ShuXian was his martial arts sister, and rumour has it that the level of her martial arts were not below the likes of the sect master. Zhang SongXi said, “Her name is not listed on the calling card.” Song YuanQiao said, “This guest is of great stature and importance, we should ask

master to personally receive him” as he hurriedly ran out to report to Zhang SanFeng.

Zhang SanFeng said, “I have heard that Mister Iron Zither very rarely comes to the Central Plains, I can’t believe that he would even be aware of this old man’s birthday.” He then quickly stepped outside while bringing his six disciples along with him. When they saw Mister Iron Zither He TaiChong, they found that he did not look to be of a particularly old age. Dressed in a yellow gown, there was a sort of celestial holiness to his appearance. His expression was peaceful while also not lacking the solemn dignity the sect master of a famous Orthodox sect should have. Behind him stood a group of eight disciples comprised of male and female, XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang were also included within the group.

He TaiChong performed obeisance and expressed birthday blessings to Zhang SanFeng. Zhang San Feng continually expressed gratitude and raised his hands to form a representation of greeting in return. Song YuanQiao and his five brothers all knelt down and bowed their heads to the ground, while He Tai Chong also knelt and bowed in return while saying, “The fame of the six heroes of Wu Dang spreads through the universe, how can I be worthy of such a generous act of respect?”

Zhang SanFeng led He TaiChong and his disciples into the main reception hall, and just when the host and guests had the chance to sit down and have tea be served, a young Taoist apprentice came in with a calling card in hand, presenting it to Song YuanQiao. It announced that the Kong Tong 5 elders have all arrived together. During the present era's martial arts world, the sects Shaolin and Wu Dang had the most illustrious recognition. E-Mei followed after them, and then came Kong Tong. In terms of status and rank, the likes of the Kong Tong five elders were on the same level as

Song YuanQiao. But Zhang San Feng was extremely gracious by nature, thus he stood up and said, "The Kong Tong five elders have arrived. Brother He, please wait here for a short while this old priest goes out to receive the guests."

He TaiChong thought to himself, "To receive guests like the Kong Tong 5 elders, just sending out a disciple is good enough."

Not soon after, the Kong Tong elders entered accompanied by their disciples. After that, the Heavenly Fists School, Sea Salt Sect, Huge Whale Clan, Wu Shan Clan and many figures of eminence and importance from other schools and clans have also arrived on the mountain to express their blessings for the birthday. Song YuanQiao and his brothers had originally intended for this day to be a celebration between their master and his disciples, they never expected that so many guests would arrive as well. Each of the six disciples were all bustling around, receiving guests without a moment's chance to rest. What Zhang SanFeng disliked the most throughout his life were these unnecessary rites and customs, thus during his seventy, eighty and ninetieth birthday, he would purposely remind his disciples to not alarm outsiders. But ironically on his one hundredth birthday, the fundamental core of the marital arts world would be gathered together here. It eventually got to be that within the Purple Paradise Hall, there wasn't even enough chairs for the guests to sit in. Song YuanQiao could only send people to go outside to bring in some round rocks and closely packed them together amongst the hall. The sect masters and clan leaders of the various sects and clans were all afforded a chair, but their disciples could only sit on the rocks. All the teacups were used, and they could only resort to using rice bowls and meal bowls to serve the tea.

Zhang SongXi pulled Zhang CuiShan into the side rooms

before asking, "Brother, have you noticed anything?" Zhang CuiShan replied, "They've all planned beforehand to meet here. Although they were fully aware of what to expect, and confident about who they will see, yet some people would purposely feign surprised and end up making their masquerade all the more obvious." Zhang SongXi said, "That's right. They did not come with true intentions of celebrating master's birthday." Zhang CuiShan said, "Celebrating the birthday is just their excuse, when a planned interrogation comprises their true intentions." Zhang SongXi said, "But they're not trying to interrogate master. The case of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency will very unlikely have the power of bringing Mr. Iron Zither He TaiChong to here." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes. These people are all here because of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun."

Zhang SongXi laughed coldly and said, "It seems that they've grossly underestimated the Wu Dang disciples. Even if they wanted to intimidate us with sheer numbers, did they think that a Wu Dang disciple would sell out their own friend? Brother, even if this Xie Xun is indeed a malicious and unforgivable crook, he is nevertheless your sworn brother. His whereabouts most definitely cannot be revealed through your lips." Zhang CuiShan agreed, "You're absolutely right brother. But what should we do now?" Zhang SongXi pondered briefly before saying, "We could only be on our guards for now. As long as we brothers stick and stand by each other, our combined strengths can shatter through solid gold. What big waves and storms haven't the Seven Heroes of WuTang experienced? Why would we be afraid of them?"

Although Yu DaiYan was crippled, he was still considered as a part of the "Seven Heroes of Wu Tang," and behind the seven brothers, there still stood a grand Master Zhang SanFeng whose martial arts brilliancy can illuminate and astound the past and present, crowning and eclipsing over his

contemporaries. It was just that the two brothers were being considerate of the fact that their master has now reached the advanced age of a hundred, thus even though the situation in front of them right now was extremely complicated, yet all the brothers still hoped to handle everything by themselves. Naturally, they wouldn't want to have their master take action himself, yet they also wouldn't want him to worry. Zhang SongXi's words were an attempt at reassuring his martial arts brother, but within his heart he knew that today's problem would be a very complicated matter. To protect the sect's well-being today will truly prove to be very difficult challenge.

Back within the main reception hall, Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and Yin LiTing were all accompanying the guests, engaging in light conversation. The three of them had already recognized that something was not right about the guests and were all estimating about the situation within their hearts.

In the midst of the conversations, another young apprentice came in and reported, "Disciples of the E-Mei sect, revered nun JingXuan along with five of her fellow martial art brothers and sisters have arrived to celebrate Grand Master's birthday." Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou both laughed at the same time while looking over at Yin LiTing. At that time Muo ShengGu was currently outside, accompanying the eight or nine guests into the direction of the reception hall. Zhang SongXi and Zhang CuiShan happened to be stepping out from the inner rooms right at that moment, and when they heard that the E-Mei disciples had arrived, they also grin slightly at Yin LiTing. Yin LiTing's face was beet red, while his motions betrayed his shyness. Zhang CuiShan grabbed his hand and said while laughing, "Come, come, come, let's go and welcome our guests."

As they both stepped out of the doors, they immediately saw this revered nun Jing Xuan was a nun already in her mid forties, built tall and sturdy, and possessing of a very commanding and arresting presence. Even though she was a female, yet she was taller than the average male by half a head. Amongst the five disciples standing behind her, there was a thin man in his mid thirties and two other nuns. Zhang CuiShan has already encountered revered nun Jing Xuan the other day on the boat amongst the sea. There were two other girls in their twenties, one's lips were pursed in a faint smile while the other girl had snow white skin and a long, slender body. This lovely girl's head was lowered while she fingered the corner of her clothing. This was of course the future wife to be of Yin LiTing, the daughter of the Golden Whip Ji family, Ji XiaoFu.

Zhang CuiShan approached and expressed greetings before accompanying the six guests inside. Yin LiTing was incredibly embarrassed and didn't even dare to take one glance into Ji XiaoFu's direction. When they approached the corridor, he observed that everyone had grouped together and were walking ahead of them therefore couldn't help himself from glancing over at Ji XiaoFu. During that time Ji XiaoFu's head was lowered, but just at that moment she also happened to look over at him, causing the eyes of both parties to meet. Ji XiaoFu's younger apprentice sister Bei JinYi gave out a loud cough, causing the two of them to be so embarrassed that they immediately whipped their heads back around, their faces flushed into a deep colour of red. Bei JinYi bursted out into a giggle and then said in a low voice, "Sister, that brother Yin is even shyer than you." Ji XiaoFu's body suddenly trembled a few times as her face turned into an ashen colour of grey, glistening tears were brimming in her eyes.

During all during this time, Zhang SongXi was assessing their

situation and calculating the dynamics between his sect and their enemies. When he saw the six disciples of the E-Mei sect come in, he felt somewhat relieved, as he thought to himself: "Miss Ji is sixth brother's future wife-to-be, if debating doesn't work out later and we do end up in a fight, the E-Mei sect may stand on our side to help us."

The various crowds of guests continued to arrive and time very quickly approached midday. There was absolutely no preparation within the Purple Paradise Hall beforehand, therefore what kind of banquet could they possibly arrange? The cook could only give each person a big bowl of white rice and arrange some simple vegetables and tofu on top. The six disciples of Wu Dang repeatedly expressed their apologies, but they've observed that while the guests were eating their rice, they kept repeatedly glancing towards the outer doors of the hall, as if they were expecting somebody.

Song YuanQiao and his brothers were carefully observing each person, and they noticed that each sect's sect master and each clan's clan leader were all retaining their dignity and status by not bringing any weapons along with them. But noises were emanating from the waist area of many of their disciples and clan members, very obviously a sign that they were carrying weapons on them. Only the disciples of the three sects E-Mei, Kun Lung and Kong Tong were empty handed. Song YuanQiao and all his brothers felt indignant anger within their hearts as they thought to themselves, "You all say that you are here to celebrate my master's birthday, but then why would you secretly conceal weapons?"

When they looked over the presents that everyone brought, they found that the majority of them were stuff that can be purchased at the last minute from the markets located at the foot of the mountain. Such things as birthday buns and birthday noodles were all that of which could be easily

bought in haste. Not only was it incredibly incongruous with the status of a martial arts Grand Master such as Zhang SanFeng, but it was similarly contradictory with regards to the reputation and illustriousness of the leaders and masters of each sect and clan.

Only the E-Mei sect presented a real present that was truly worthy of cherishing. Aside from the sixteen colours of valuable jade, there was also a large brocaded Taoist gown that had the word "Longevity" embroidered with gold thread one hundred times and in one hundred different styles of writing. It could be imagined the great deal of time that must have been spent in order to complete such a gown. Revered nun Jing Xuan explained to Zhang SanFeng, "This was completed by the combined efforts of ten female disciples of the E-Mei sect." Zhang SanFeng's heart was quite touched as he smiled and said, "E-Mei heroines' fists and sword skills have long been made famous throughout the world, and to have them bring this wonderful embroidered gown for this old man today is a huge honour indeed."

Zhang SongXi was closely observing everyone's expressions while thinking to himself, "What kind of powerful backup are they all waiting for? Coincidentally master does not enjoy festive celebrations and didn't invite Wu Dang's closest friends here ahead of time, otherwise we most definitely wouldn't be caught in such an circumstance today, where we are so greatly outnumbered and cut off from any assistance." His thoughts are based on the assertion that his master's acquaintances and friends have always spread throughout the world. The seven brothers have similarly performed many heroic deeds and charitable acts of kindness, forming many ties of goodwill. Had they been prepared ahead of time, they most definitely would have been able to invite a few dozen first rate fighters to come and attend today's birthday banquet.

Yu LianZhou who was standing by Zhang SongXi whispered, "We had originally intended to wait until after master's birthday before we distributed the Hero Invitations and conducted a Heroes Banquet at the WuChang⁷ town's Yellow Crane Restaurant. Can't believe that just this one error would cause the whole match to be controlled within the hands of others." He had already planned out everything within his head. He originally intended for Zhang Cui Shan to declare at the Hero's Banquet his justification of not betraying a friend. All members of the JiangHu world highly value and respect the notion of "righteousness," thus as long as Zhang CuiShan openly declare this as his reason, nobody could force him to take on the crime of being a unrighteous rogue. Even if there were those who wouldn't be willing to give up so easily, as long as there are a good number of first rate fighters that are true friends of the Wu Dang sect attending that banquet, then even if the situation is forced to the point of using martial arts to solve problems, the Wu Dang sect can at least not worry about losing. But who would have thought that the others would already have discerned this step and would actually use the excuse of celebrating a birthday to first gather together a sufficient number of helpers and charge up on the mountain to catch the unsuspecting and unprepared Wu Dang sect at a disadvantage?

Zhang SongXi whispered softly, "Since the situation has come to this point, the only choice we have is to fight to our deaths."

Amongst the seven heroes of Wu Dang, Zhang SongXi was the most astute and clever of them all. Whenever he came across a difficult or a tricky challenge, he would often be able to come up with a solution or plan to turn the tables around. Yu LianZhou secretly thought to himself, "If even fourth brother is at lost with what to do, I'm afraid that today the

blood of Wu Dang's six disciples will have to soak the earth of this mountain." If they were fighting one on one, amongst the guests today, there probably would be none who could compete with the six heroes of Wu Dang. But the situation right now on the mountaintop was not just a case of twenty against one, but was a thirty and forty against one sort of situation.

Zhang SongXi gave a light tug at the corner of Yu LianZhou's clothes, and the two of them went out to the quarters behind the reception hall. Once there, Zhang SongXi said, "In a moment, if all attempts at discussing and reasoning fails, we'll try to use words to pressure them into agreeing on an one on one fight with us. By using six matches to determine the winner, we will most definitely be residing in the undefeatable position. But they came with preparation and would have thought of this already, therefore they definitely won't agree to giving up after just six matches, it most likely will end up being a gang brawl sort of situation." Yu LianZhou nodded his head and said, "The first thing we must do is help our third brother to escape, we must not let him land into other people's hands to suffer through more torture. I will give this task to you. I'm afraid that our sister's health may not be very strong right now, tell fifth brother to invest all his attention on her. Other matters of countering the adversaries and defending against menaces can be left for the rest of us to chip in a little more work."

Zhang SongXi nodded his head and said, "Alright. That's what we will do then." He hesitated briefly before saying, "There may still be one measure we can take, it will be a dangerous step but we may pull through if we're lucky." Yu Lian Zhou said with jubilation, "Even if it is a dangerous step, we have no other choice. What brilliant plan do you have in mind Brother?" Zhang SongXi replied, "We can each mark a target opponent and once that person takes action, we will

each strike at our opponent by using just one stance, have them under our control. That way, they will all take caution and won't dare to pressure us through sheer force." Yu LianZhou debated for a while before saying, "If we can't capture them in one stance, the others will most definitely advance as backup help. But to be able to succeed with just one stance, I'm afraid ..." Zhang SongXi said, "Desperate times calls for desperate measures, I'm afraid that we have no choice but to be more vicious. Let us use the 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill'!" Yu LianZhou was taken back as he said, " 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill'? But today is master's birthday, wouldn't it be too cruel and deadly to use such a move?"

There was still actually a very powerful grappling technique within the Wu Dang sect that was called the "Tiger Claws." After Yu LianZhou became fully educated in this skill, he remain unsatisfied at how when the fighter clamps down, if their opponent's martial arts were advanced enough, they will be able to struggle free using their powerful energy reservoir. Therefore it will likely end up being a competition of inner energies. He thus purposely added variations to modify the "Tiger Claws" and finally created twenty new stances.

Before Zhang SanFeng accepted his disciples, he would closely examine and test into their character and morality while also discovering what their aptitude and talents were. Therefore after the seven disciples entered the sect, there was not one who hasn't been able to achieve greatness. Not only did they each inherit their sect's martial arts skills, but they were further able to modify and create new stances according to their own personal nature and character. It was originally not a surprising thing that Yu LianZhou would transform the stances of the "Tiger Claws." But after Zhang SanFeng watched him demonstrate these moves, he only

nodded his head and didn't input any further remarks.

When Yu LianZhou observed how his master didn't offer a single remark or comment, he knew that there most definitely must be some kind of problem with his stances. Therefore he concentrated his energies on examining and scrutinizing every move in hopes of further improving and advancing these stances. After a few months, when he once again demonstrated his revisions for his master, Zhang SanFeng was only heard to sigh and said, "LianZhou, these twelve stances of the Tigers claws are truly much more powerful than the ones that I taught you. But your every stance aims to attack one's vital points. No matter who sustains this stance, they may possibly suffer the misfortune of having their Yin forces damaged and their chances of procreation ended. Are the decent and respectable stances that I taught you not enough? Must one resort to ending another's chances of procreation with every strike?"

After Yu LianZhou heard this sermon from his master, even in the midst of the harsh cold weather, he couldn't refrain a cold sweat all from erupting all over his back. Fear struck his heart, and he immediately admitted to his mistake and begged for forgiveness.

After a few days, Zhang SanFeng called his seven disciples to him and explained this incident to them before saying, "These twelve stances that LianZhou created was a result of hard work and honourable intentions, and are truly worthy of being considered as a ultimate skill. To abolish it based on just my one command may nevertheless be a pity. You should all learn this skill from LianZhou, but take caution to never use this skill lightly. Do not use it in anything less than a life and death situation. I will add the two words "Destroying Procreation" after the words "Tiger Claws" in order to remind you all that this skill can end all chances others have at

procreation, thus running the danger of ending a whole family's lineage."

The seven disciples immediately expressed their gratitude for this lecture and Yu LianZhou then related this martial art skill to his six brothers. After the seven of them mastered this skill, they indeed obeyed their master's teachings and not one of them has used this skill even once. Even during such a critical juncture, when Zhang SongXi brought this up, Yu LianZhou still debated and and continue to hesitate.

Zhang SongXi said, "Once this 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill' grapples onto other's vital points, there is a chance that it will end their chances of procreation. Your brother I have a plan, we can choose only monks or Taoist priests as our opponents, or if not, then old men in their seventies and eighties will also be suitable." Yu LianZhou smiled faintly and said, "Brother, your vigilant thinking is not only nimble but also ingenious. Since monks and Taoists priests will not be having any children, to use this move on them is acceptable."

After the two brothers finished discussing their plans, the split up to inform Song YuanQiao and the other three brothers. Each one of them targeted a specific opponent and as soon as they hear a loud shout of "a-yo" from Zhang SongXi, the six of them would each use the "Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill" to capture their opponents. Yu LianZhou selected the oldest of the Kong Tong elders Guan Neng, while Zhang CuiShan chose Kun Lun's taoist priest XiHua Zi.

After the various guests finished their simple meal, the culinary workers took away the eating utensils. Zhang Song Xi then loudly said, "Honoured heroes and fellow friends, today is our master's hundredth year birthday. To be graced

by the presence of so many heroes today fills everyone in our sect with glory and honour. But please do forgive us for the bareness and inefficiency in our reception here today. Our master had originally planned to invite all our respected guests to WuChang town's Yellow Crane Restaurant for a festive gathering. During that date, we most certainly will make up for the discourtesy in our reception here today. My brother Zhang CuiShan has been separated from us for ten years now, and it was just today that he finally returned to us from afar. He has not even had the chance to explain in detail to my master all of which he has encountered and experienced within the last ten years. Besides, today is our master's big celebration, if we bother ourselves with discussing about the martial art world's various scores of gratitude and vengeance, duels and deaths, it may be a very untimely and inappropriate thing to do. Our honoured guests' pure intentions of offering birthday blessings will then turn into a purposely contrived plan of coming here to incite disharmony and create more trouble. Very seldom will all our honoured guests be gathered together here at Wu Dang, please allow me the honours of accompanying everyone for a tour around the mountain where we can appreciate the scenery."

This speech from him caused everyone to be at a loss for words. By stating ahead of time that today was a blessed day of celebration, if anybody mentioned Xie Xun and Dragon Gate Escort Agency's incident, then they are purposely and openly making enemies with the Wu Dang Sect.

These groups of people arrived on the mountain one after another, and aside from the E-Mei sect, they were all originally prepared to engage in a good battle in order to force out the whereabouts of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun. But the Wu Dang sect's great fame was so authoritative and respected, nobody dared to make enemies with the Wu

Dang sect on their own. If these few hundred people all rushed forward as one group, they would of course have nothing to be worry about. But when requiring somebody to stand out by themselves to make the first move, nobody wanted to take on the role of the sacrificial lamb.

Everyone looked at each other in a moment of uncomfortable silence. Kun Lun sect's XiHua Zi stood up and shouted loudly, "Hero Zhang SongXi, there's no need to strike first with your words. We're all forthright people and there's no need to beat around the bush. We will be honest with you, the purpose of our visit to the mountain today is firstly to celebrate Master Zhang's birthday, but then we would also like to find out about the bandit Xie Xun's current whereabouts.

Muo ShengGu's simmering anger has been bottled up for most of the day. At this moment, he could no longer hold back anymore as he laughed coldly and said, "Oh really? So that's how it is, no wonder, no wonder!" XiHua Zi's pair of eyes flared up as he asked, "What do you mean by 'no wonder'?" Muo Sheng Gu replied, "I just heard a moment ago that you came to Wu Dang today for the celebration of my master's birthday, but than at the same time you would all secretly carry weapons on yourselves. That makes me wonder, did all of you bring your precious sabers and esteemed swords here today because you wanted to present it to my master as a birthday gift? It's only now that I understand what a priceless gift you're all delivering here." XiHua Zi smacked his hand against the table and then immediately undid his robe before loudly saying, "Hero Muo, take a good and close look. Don't learn to frame and slander other people's honour at such a young age. Where do you see any weapons on our bodies?"

Muo ShengGu laughed coldly and said, "Very good. There indeed aren't any," and he then extended two fingers to

lightly tug on the belt of the two people standing beside him. His movements were so quick, with just this one tug he was able to snap apart the belt on those two people. Immediately clanking and clanging sounds were heard sequentially as two short daggers fell to the ground, its dazzling glint catching everybody's eyes. With this, everyone's countenance underwent a great change while XiHua Zi roared out, "That's right. If Hero Zhang won't reveal to us Xie Xun's current whereabouts, then who knows? We may very well have to resort to our sabers and swords!"

Zhang SongXi was just about to loudly shout out the secret code "a-yo" in order to take advantage of striking out first when suddenly from outside the door drifted in a voice that said, "Amita Buddha." This Buddhist incantation very clearly transmitted into everybody's ear drums, ringing out loud and clear. Though it appeared to be coming from afar, yet when heard it also sounded as if it was spoken by somebody right beside you.

Zhang SanFeng smiled and said, "The Shaolin sect's Abbot Kong Wen has arrived, hurry out and receive him." The voice from outside was immediately heard to reply, "Shaolin's Abbot Kong Wen along with his fellow martial art brothers Kong Zhi, Kong Xing and sect disciples have come to wish Grand Master Zhang a thousand autumns of eternal happiness."

The three monks Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin⁸. Aside from Reverend Kong Jian who has died, the other three Reverends has all arrived here today. In the midst of his shock, Zhang SongXi was unable to give that shout of "a-yo." Now that Shaolin's supreme martial artists have arrived here on Wu Dang, he knew then even if the six brothers can use the "Tiger Claws Destroying

Procreation Skill” to control Kun Lun and Kong Tong sect's key figures, it would still be useless.

Kun Lun sect's sect-master He TaiChong said, “I've long heard of the Shaolin Divine Reverends' great name. To have the chance of encountering all three here today certainly made this a worthy trip.” Another somewhat low and husky voice from outside the door was heard to say, “This must be Kun Lun's sect leader Mister He. It is a pleasure, a pleasure indeed. Grand Master Zhang, the three of us have arrived here much too late to celebrate your birthday, it truly is discourteous of us.” Zhang SanFeng replied, “The number of guests concentrated here on top of the Wu Dang mountain today are as vast as the clouds, this old man has only lived a hundred years of an unimportant life, how can I possibly bother the three Divine Reverends' to make such a trip?”

Through the generation of their internal energies, these four people were able to exchange words through the separation of several partitions, each conversing with the effortless ease akin to having a casual conversation with somebody standing right in front of them. The internal energies of E-Mei sect's revered nuns Jing Xuan and Jing Xu, Kong Tong's Guan Neng, Zong WeiXia, Tang WenLiang, Chang JingZhi and the likes' did not reach this level, thus naturally they could not join in on the conversation. The figures belonging to the rest of the sects and clans were even more astonished, while within their hearts they were simultaneously feeling shame at their inability to compare.

Zhang SanFeng brought his disciples along with him as they started to step outside in order to greet them, but immediately they saw the three Divine Reverends slowly walk into the reception hall, bringing in nine other monks along with them.

Abbot Kong Wen's white eyebrows drooped downwards to almost cover over his eyes, very much like a long browed LoHan. Kong Xing's body was robust and broad, while his expression was similarly forceful and quite commanding. As for Kong Zhi, his whole face was marked by sorrow, and even the corners of his mouth turned downwards. Song YuanQiao was secretly surprised, for he was well acquainted with the art of face reading. He thought to himself, "The typical person born with Reverend Kong Zhi's physiognomy would suffer such a fate that even if they don't have a short life span, they will at least experience unexpected calamities early in life. Why is it that he not only enjoys the pleasure of longevity, but will also end up being what all people of the martial arts world accept as a Grand Master? It seems that my knowledge in the art of face reading is still much too amateurish."

Even though Zhang SanFeng along with Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were all Grand Masters of the martial arts world, yet they have never encountered each other before. In terms of age, Zhang SanFeng was thirty to forty years older than the three Reverends. He originated from the Shaolin sect, and if using his master Jue Yuan as a measure to determine generational rank and hierarchy, then he would actually be two generations above the likes of Kong Wen. But since he never officially took the commandment to become a monk within Shaolin, and because he never officially learned any Shaolin martial arts from the monks, therefore they all treated each other in the manner of equals. But Song YuanQiao and his brothers were actually reduced a generation.

Zhang SanFeng welcomed Kong Wen into the reception hall. He TaiChong, revered nun Jing Xuan, Guan Neng and the likes all game forward to greet them, each offering their words of respect and admiration, bringing forth another

round of formal courtesies. Coincidentally, the Abbott Kong Wen was extremely humble and would join his palms to greet every junior in each clan and each pupil of every sect, offering a few formal words of greeting, bring forth a moment of cluttered confusion before a few hundred people could all be acknowledged.

The three Divine Reverends Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing all sat down and took a sip of green tea. Kong Wen then said, "Grand Master Zhang, in terms of age and generational ranking, this worthless monk is your junior. Today, aside from offering you birthday blessings, all other stuff should originally not be mentioned. But since this worthless monk shameless takes on the title of Shaolin's Head Abbot, there are therefore a few words which I must reveal to Grand Master Zhang with utmost honesty."

Zhang SanFeng has always been a resolute and frank person, thus he spoke with utmost honesty, "Divine Reverends, did you come here today because of my fifth ranking disciple Zhang CuiShan?" When Zhang CuiShan heard his master mention his name, he immediately stood up.

Kong Wen replied, "Yes indeed. We have two things that we have to ask Hero Zhang. The first thing concerns Hero Zhang murdering seventy-one lives of an agency belonging to a Shaolin disciple's Dragon Gate Escort Agency, and then further killing six Shaolin monks. All together, it comprises seventy-seven lives, how should this situation be handled? The second thing is, our older martial arts brother Reverend Kong Jian lived a life of beneficence and morality, though never competing with anyone for anything, yet in the end would die a terrible death under the murderer Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun's hands. It's rumoured that Hero Zhang you are aware of this bandit Xie's whereabouts, we ask you to please point us to the right direction."

Zhang CuiShan replied in a clear voice, "Abbot Kong Wen, the murdering of the seventy-seven lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and Shaolin sect was not your respectful pupil's doing. I, Zhang Cui Shan have been disciplined and shaped by my honoured teacher. Though I may be a piece of untalented and incompetent material, yet I would never dare to tell a single lie. As for the identity of the person who took the lives of the seventy-seven people, your humble pupil is indeed aware of whom this person is, but I do not desire to reveal the truth. That is the first issue. As for the second issue, there is nobody of the world who was not saddened and desolate over the Reverend Kong Jian's untimely departure from the world. However, the Golden Mane Lion King and your young pupil I are sworn brothers. To be honest, your humble pupil I am aware of the current whereabouts of Xie Xun, but those of us in the martial arts world value and honour the word "Righteousness" more than anything. Zhang CuiShan's head can fall and my blood can spill, but I most definitely will not reveal my sworn brother's whereabouts. This incident has absolutely nothing to do with my revered teacher and my fellow sect members, anything and everything will be accounted for by Zhang CuiShan's solitary self. If everyone must insist on using death as a threat, then whether you choose to come forward for a kill or to administer a blow, then go ahead. In Zhang CuiShan's whole life, he has never done one thing that will disgrace or sully the honour of his sect and has never killed one undeserving person. But if everyone wants to force me to be unrighteous today, then I can only use death as my answer." These words of Zhang Cui Shan were spoken with boldness, his expression one of justified rectitude.

Kong Wen murmured a "Amita Buddha" while thinking to himself, "From his words, it really doesn't sound like he's lying. What should be done now?"

It was at this moment when from outside the long windows of the reception hall suddenly came a young child's voice that cried, "Father!"

There was a big thump in Zhang CuiShan's heart for this voice belonged to Wuji. He loudly responded, "Wuji! You've come back?" and immediately dashed outside while caught up in the midst of his bewildered joy. Wu Shan sect and Heavenly Fists Clan each had someone standing by the door of the reception hall. They only conjectured that Zhang CuiShan must be trying to escape therefore shouted out simultaneously, "Where do you think you're going?" and extended their hands to clamp down. Zhang CuiShan was filled with haste due to the extreme concern for his child, thus with a contraction of his two arms, caused the two people to fly back separately into the left and right directions for more than a few dozen feet due to the impacting shock. After rushing out beyond the long windows, he only saw a mass of emptiness and silence. Where is there even a trace of a person's shadow? He loudly cried, "Wuji, Wuji!" but no reply was heard.

The people within the reception hall have already rushed out, but when seeing that Zhang CuiShan hasn't escape, did not advance to capture him and only stood by a side watching over him.

Zhang CuiShan continued to cry, "Wuji, Wuji!" but was again met with no answer. By this time, Yin SuSu's health had already recovered a fair bit, therefore even from the back room she could faintly discern her husband crying "Wuji" and immediately bolted outside, crying in a trembling voice, "Did Wuji return?" Zhang Cui Shan replied, "I thought I heard his voice just a moment ago. But when I chased outside, there was nobody." Greatly disappointed, Yin SuSu murmured, "It

must your longing for our child that induced you to hear wrong." For a while, Zhang Cui Shan was in a state of stupefied shock, but he then shook his head and said, "I heard him, I know I did." He then hurriedly said, "Go back inside" for he worried that there would be further trouble if his wife interacted with the crowd of guests.

After he returned to the reception hall, he approached Kong Wen and bowed before saying, "In the midst of pining to be reunited with my little child, your unworthy student dared to be so discourteous, may Reverend Abbot you please forgive me."

Kong Wen said, "Such is well, such is well. Hero Zhang, your fervent longing for your beloved son is so full of anguish, yet did you really think that all those people who were murdered by Xie Xun did not have a father, mother, wife and children as well?" His body was very small and skinny, but his every word was spoken with booming clarity, reverberating in the eardrums of all the people within the reception hall. Zhang CuiShan's heart was in a state of befuddlement grief and could find no words to respond.

Abbot Kong Wen then turned to Zhang SanFeng to say, "Grand Master Zhang, how do you suggest we should handle today's issues? I'd like to ask master you to please provide for us an answer."

Zhang SanFeng said, "This young disciple of mine may not have many worthy merits, but he most definitely would not lie to his master, and I don't think he would dare to lie to the three divine reverends. The people of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and your sect were not killed by him and as for Xie Xun's whereabouts, that is something he refuses to reveal."

Kong Zhi said with a cold laugh, "But there was someone who

witnessed Hero Zhang CuiShan kill our sect's disciples with their very own eyes. So is it that Wu Dang disciples will never dare to offer dishonest words, while the Shaolin disciples will?" And with a wave of his left hand, three middle aged monks stepped out from behind him.

The three monks were each blind in their right eye. They were of course the monks who were blinded by Yin SuSu's silver needles at the riverside of LinAn City's XiHu, Yuan Xin, Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye.

These three monks followed Abbot Kong Wen and the others to the Wu Dang mountain, and were observed by Zhang CuiShan from the beginning. He knew within his heart that he must answer to the bloodbath by the riverside of the Xi Hu. As expected, the Abbot Kong Wen spoke not more than a few words and already brought out the three monks. Zhang CuiShan was put into a tough spot, for the person who committed the murders by the bank of the XiHu was indeed not him, yet the true culprit was now his wife. The love between the couple was deep and the faith they held towards each other was strong, how could they possibly not shield each other from harm? But now at this point and in this situation, how is one to protect the other?

Amongst the "Yuan" generation, Yuan Ye was the most hot-tempered. In accordance to his character, he would have struck out at Zhang CuiShan with all he's got the moment he saw him. But because his martial art uncles were all there, he was therefore forced to restrain himself. But at that time, it was his master who called him out, thus he immediately shouted, "Zhang CuiShan, at Lin An City's Xi Hu banks, you projected poisonous needles into the mouth of Hui Feng, taking his life. I saw that with my very own eyes, did you think I was framing you? The three of us were blinded in the right eye by your silver needles, did you still want to

confound us and lay blame on others?"

At this point, Zhang CuiShan could only argue point for point as he said, "Although we do use a pretty extensive range of weapons within the Wu Dang sect, yet they are all large sized projectiles along the likes of steel darts and sleeve arrows. My six fellow sect members and myself have been around in the martial arts world for quite a while now, but has there been anyone who's seen a Wu Dang disciple use any gold or silver needles type of weapons? As for acts such as coating poison onto the needles, that is a concept even more undeserving of my refute."

The ways and actions of the seven heroes of Wu Dang have always been honourable and upright, that was something everybody within the martial arts world knew. Therefore all the martial art fighters that were gathered together here on the mountain truly found the idea of Zhang CuiShan using poisonous needles to harm others hard to believe.

Yuan Ye shouted with anger, "Even at this point, you're still trying to deny it? That day when you used needles to kill Hui Feng, my martial arts older brother Yuan Yin and myself clearly witnessed and discerned everything clearly and without any further doubt. If it wasn't you, then who was it?" Zhang CuiShan replied, "Just because there was somebody in your sect who fell into harm and injury, that gives you right to come to our Wu Dang sect and request us to tell you who the culprit was that injured your sect members? Since when was such a rule established?" Zhang CuiShan's intellect was quick and his tongue was sharp, he was good with words and skilled in debating. In the midst of his anger, Yuan Ye's words were becoming increasingly nonsensical, causing what was originally a very justified incrimination to suddenly become akin to an unreasonable allegation.

Zhang SongXi immediately added, "Brother Yuan Ye, at present it's still not possible to ascertain who it was that wounded those Shaolin monks. However, our sect's Yu DaiYan was most definitely injured under the hands of Shaolin's Golden Steel Fingers. Everyone has come here at just the right time, we were just planning to inquire about who was the culprit that used the Golden Steel Fingers to injure my third brother?"

Yuan Ye's mouth gaped open and was completely tongue tied. He could only stutter out the words, "Not me."

Zhang SongXi gave out an icy laugh and said, "I know it wasn't you. I doubt that you would have that kind of power." After pausing a while, he continued, "If my third brother was perfectly healthy when he was exchanging stances with your revered sect's skilled fighters, then even if he was injured under the Golden Steel Fingers, he can only blame himself for being unable to excel in martial arts. Since in all types of battles and martial art exchanges, injuries and even deaths will likely occur, what else can he say? Can any guarantee be established before a fight that can warrant that a single strand of hair will not be harmed? But at that time, my brother was severely ill, he wasn't able to move even a single finger on his body. That Shaolin disciple used Golden Steel Finger to brutally cripple his arms and legs in order to force him to reveal the whereabouts of the Dragon Saber."

Having gotten to this point, he raised his voice to cry out, "You would think that Shaolin's martial arts eclipses over the whole martial arts world already, and they have also long been considered as the martial arts world's most venerable sect. Why must you still desire to possess the precious Dragon Saber in order to be satisfied? Besides, my third brother has only seen that Dragon Saber once, but the methods employed by your revered sect's disciples are really much too inhuman and atrocious. Within the martial arts

world, Yu DaiYan can still be considered as possessing of some respectful fame. Within his whole life, he has only committed heroic and righteous acts of charity, doing many good deeds for the martial arts world. Now, because of a Shaolin disciple, he's crippled for his whole life, causing him to spend these last ten years lying on his bed unable to get up. We were just planning to ask the three divine reverends, what does Shaolin plan to do about this?"

Because of Yu DaiYan's injuries and the deaths of the whole Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Shaolin and Wu Dang have already spent much time over these debates. But they were never able to come to a conclusion because of Zhang CuiShan's disappearance. Zhang SongXi purposely brought out this case again when he observed Kong Wen and Yuan Ye all speak with such forceful justification.

The Abbot Kong Wen said, "I have already gone over this before. The disciples within our sect have already been investigated and questioned over in detail already. Nobody from our sect harmed Hero Yu."

Zhang SongXi reached his hands into his pockets and brought out a golden nugget, the finger marks left on the gold nugget can be clearly seen. He loudly exclaimed, "As all heroes can see, the culprits responsible for my brother Yu's injuries is the Shaolin disciple who left these marks on the golden nugget. Aside from the Shaolin sect's Golden Steel Finger, which school and which sect can boast to have a martial art skill that can produce such a mark on gold?"

Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye were trying to incriminate Zhang CuiShan based solely on their words, but Zhang SongXi was able to produce material evidence which would of course be much more convincing than proof-less conjectures and empty words.

Kong Wen said, "May the Buddha have mercy. Aside from the three of us brothers, there are also three other elders within our sect who have been able to master this skill of the Golden Steel Fingers. But these three elders have not stepped out of Shaolin's doors for thirty or forty years now. How would they be able to harm Hero Yu?"

Muo ShengGu suddenly chimed in, "Revered abbot, you wouldn't believe my fifth brother's words because you insist that his defense was based solely on the testimonial of just his one person, but are the words of Revered abbot you not also based on just your sole defense?"

Abbot Kong Wen's character was quite gracious and even though he recognized the disrespect in Muo ShengGu's words, he was not angry and only said, "If Hero Muo you don't believe this old monk's words, then there's nothing I can do." Muo ShengGu said, "How could your humble pupil I possibly dare to not believe revered abbot's words? But things in life are often unpredictable and prone to change. What is right, wrong, true and false will often turn out to be contrary to one's expectations. You only insist that the fellow Shaolin monks were injured under my fifth brother's hands, and we also believe that my third brother must have been injured under the fingers of a skilled Shaolin fighter. But it may very well be that are still secret twists unbeknownst to us all. According to your unworthy pupil's views, these incidents still requires further examination and reconsideration in order to not disturb the harmony between the Shaolin and Wu Dang sects. If we handle things in a crass or crude manner, then one day when the truth is finally revealed, there will only be regrets." Kong Wen nodded his head and said, "Hero Muo's words are right indeed."

Kong Zhi shouted with severe anger, "But are we just going

to forget about the wrongful murder of our martial arts brother Kong Jian? Hero Zhang, we can put aside the death of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency for the time being. But today, if you are willing to reveal the whereabouts of the vicious bandit Xie Xun, then you better start revealing it because even if you are not willing to speak, we're still going to make you speak!"

Up to this moment, Yu LianZhou has been silent, but seeing that the situation has reached a deadlock, he said loudly, "If the Dragon Sabre was not in the hands of Xie Xun, would Reverend still be so concerned about capturing him?" He didn't say much, but just these two lines were already powerful enough, for he was outright reprimanding Kong Zhi as harbouring the unhonourable intentions of desiring to covet a precious treasure.

Kong Zhi was extremely enraged and with a slap, smashed his palm down upon the wooden table in front of him. With a bang, the table's four legs broke simultaneously as the table immediately shattered and the wooden splinters of the tabletop spewed everywhere. The immense force harboured within that palm was frightening. He roared with rage, "I've long heard that Grand Master Zhang's martial arts originated from Shaolin, but the word within the martial arts world has it that Master Zhang's martial arts excels beyond that of his originator. We've long been admirers even though we may not have been able to ascertain whether there is indeed truth in this rumour. Today, in the presence of the world's heroes, let us take this opportunity to boldly ask Grand Master Zhang to teach us a thing or two by exchanging a few stances with us!"

As soon as he said these words, all the fighters within the room were brought to an excited state of frenzy. It has now been seventy years since Zhang SanFeng made a name for

himself, but all the fighters who had the chance to combat with him have all died over time. There was not a single one of them left in this world who can testify to exactly how fathomless his martial arts were. Thus, even though there were all sorts of extraordinary and fantastic legends circulating within the martial arts world, nobody aside from his seven exclusive disciples had the chance to witness Zhang SanFeng's brilliance with their very own eyes. But Song YuanQiao and his brothers have stunned and dazzled the world with the celebrated name of the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang. If just the disciples can already be seen to have such powers, it would be hard to imagine much less describe what heights their master's abilities would reach.

When the people outside of the Shaolin and Wu Dang sect heard Kong Zhi publicly declare a challenge against Zhang SanFeng, there was not a single person who was not roused into a state of excitement. They were all thinking within their heads that this was certainly turning out to be a worthwhile trip now that they had the chance to witness with their very own eyes the power of the present era's number one martial artist.

Everyone's eyes immediately shot towards Zhang SanFeng's face, anticipating his response of whether or not he was going to give his consent. But he was only seen to smile faintly and did not reveal whether he was going to accept the challenge or not.

Kong Zhi continued, "Grand Master Zhang's martial art abilities crowns over his era, and since he is already undefeatable within the world, the three of us are of course not your match. But since the situation has been forced to this point, I'm afraid that the entanglements between our two sects cannot be resolve if we don't settle it through a martial arts competition. Since master you are two generations above us, it would be much too disrespectful if

we fought you one on one. Forgive us for daring to overestimate our capabilities, but we will combine the power between the three of us in order to challenge you Grand Master.”

Everyone was thinking within their hearts, “That's some gallant-sounding excuse to cover up your intentions of combating one with the power of three. Even if Zhang SanFeng's martial arts are indeed supreme, yet he is nevertheless an old man that has reached his one hundredth year, his stamina and energy must without a doubt be on the decline. He may not be able to withstand the combined attack of the three divine reverends of Shaolin.”

Yu LianZhou said, “Today is our master's hundredth year celebration, how could he possibly engage in any physical combat with his guests? ...” when everyone heard this, they all thought, “Wu Dang sect really is going to back out from accepting this challenge.” But unexpectedly, Yu LianZhou continued, “Besides, as reverend Kong Zhi has already said, my master and the three reverends are of different generational ranks, if he really did take action, wouldn't that make him guilty of the offense of picking on his juniors? But since Shaolin has stated their challenge, the seven disciples of Wu Dang will like a chance to learn from the twelve Shaolin monk's supreme martial arts.”

After these words were spoken, there was again another great rumble that went through the whole group of guests who had all started to discuss and analyze amongst each other. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing each had three disciples who accompanied them to the mountain today, bringing the total to twelve Shaolin monks. They all knew that Yu DaiYan was completely crippled and thus there were only six out of the seven Wu Dang disciples left. To fight twelve with six is a situation based upon a one against two ratio. Such terms as

delineated by Yu LianZhou really can be said to serve a self-elevating purpose for the status of the Wu Dang sect.

Yu LianZhou's move may seem to be a risky step, and in actuality it was indeed a move that he was forced into making. He was very aware that the Shaolin reverends' martial art skills were extremely powerful, and since their ages were older than him and his brothers, their cultivation would naturally be greater. If they fought one on one, his oldest brother Song YuanQiao would be able to break even with one of the reverends, but he himself was just recovering from his injuries and may not be able to withstand one of the reverends. As for the very last reverend, regardless of whether it is Zhang SongXi, Yin LiTing, or Muo ShengGu who fights that match, they most definitely will lose to the reverend. Although his terms of challenge were officially stating that the six brothers will combat against the twelve Shaolin fighters, but the other nine Shaolin disciples can be assumed to pose a very small threat. Therefore, though it seems that the Wu Dang sect was combating a larger crowd with a smaller group, in actuality it was really the Wu Dang six disciples who were combining their powers to fight the three divine reverends of Shaolin.

How could Kong Zhi possibly not understand the dynamics of such an arrangement? After scoffing with a "hmp" he then said, "Since Master Zhang won't grace us with the honour of exchanging a few stances, then let us three brothers attempt to learn a few things by facing off against three of the Wu Dang six heroes. We can determine the victor with three matches, the side who is able to win in two of the three matches will be the winner."

Zhang SongXi said, "If reverend Kong Zhi really insists on fighting one on one, then that can also be done. But amongst the seven of us brothers, aside for my third brother Yu DaiYan who is unable to descend his bed after falling prey to the

deadly attacks of a Shaolin disciple, there is not one of us who dares to back out from a challenge. Therefore, let us then determine the winner through six matches, where each of the Wu Dang six disciples will face off with a Shaolin disciple, the side that can win four matches out of the six will be determined as the victor.”

Muo ShengGu loudly added, “Let's do it this way, if the Wu Dang sect loses, then my fifth brother Zhang will reveal the whereabouts of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun to Shaolin sect's head abbot. But if Shaolin sect does kindly grant us the honour of winning, then we'd like to ask the three reverends along with all these guests who have come to here with the excuse of celebrating a birthday, but who are in actuality looking to stir up some trouble to please leave the mountain as a group!”

Zhang SongXi's suggestion of using a six against six method of combat can already be said to situate the Wu Dang sect in the undefeatable position. For his oldest brother and second brother's martial arts can be expected to be comparable with the three divine reverends of Shaolin. As for the rest of the Shaolin disciples, they most definitely will lose in the last three matches.

Kong Zhi shook his head while muttering, “That's not right, not right.” But at the same time, he couldn't openly admit to exactly what wasn't right about such a suggestion.

Zhang SongXi said, “When divine reverends issued a challenged to my master, you said that you wanted to fight one man using the power of three. But when we said that we will use six fighters to combat the twelve revered monks of Shaolin, reverend Kong Zhi will suddenly request to fight one on one. Fine, so we'll agree to fighting one on one, but now reverend you say that such an arrangement is not right. Why

don't we just do it this way then, let your unworthy pupil I fight against Shaolin's three divine reverends by myself, then everything would be absolutely perfect right? Let the three divine reverends obliterate your unworthy pupil, then that way Shaolin can be victorious and then wouldn't that be so gratifying?"

Greatly agitated, Kong Zhi's face changed colours while Kong Wen murmured a Buddhist mantra, "Amita Buddha!" Since Kong Xin arrived on the Wu Dang mountain, he has not said one word. But at this moment he suddenly said, "Brothers, since this young hero Zhang says he wants to fight the three of us by himself, then let us do that!" Because Kong Xin had practiced monasticism from an early age, therefore even though his martial arts were skilled, he was not at all acquainted with customs of the world and could not catch the sarcasm and mockery in Zhang SongXi's words.

Kong Wen said, "Hush up brother" as he turned around and said to Song YuanQiao, "We'll do this, let the six Shaolin monks face off against the six disciples of Wu Dang. We'll determine the winners with just one match." Song YuanQiao replied, "Not the six disciples of Wu Dang, but the seven disciples of Wu Dang."

Kong Wen was greatly taken back as he asked, "Is Master Zhang also planning to join the battle as well?"

Song YuanQiao replied, "Revered Abbot's conjectures are wrong. All fighters who have fought with my teacher have long since passed away, how can my teacher possibly act out again? However, although my third brother Yu is unable to move after being burdened by severe injuries, and while he also has no disciples, yet the seven of us brothers have always been as one body. Today, in such a confrontation that will concern life, death, glory and shame, how could he

possibly stand detached without lending out a helping hand? I'll ask him to hastily find somebody and to give them a few instructions and guidelines in order for this person to substitute for him and fight on his behalf. Wu Dang's seven disciples will fight the revered monks of Shaolin as a group, it matters not whether you decide to send out seven fighters or twelve fighters!"

Kong Wen paused briefly and thought, "Within the Wu Dang sect, aside for Zhang SanFeng and his seven disciples, there hasn't been mention of any other skilled fighters. He says they'll find a last minute substitution, but what use is that? If they ask another sect's disciple to fight, then that wouldn't be a battle of the Wu Dang sect versus the Shaolin sect. He most likely was just trying to preserve the famed glory of the 'Seven Heroes of Wu Dang' when he said these words." Therefore he gave a nod with his head and said, "Alright. Then the seven monks of Shaolin will battle Wu Dang's seven heroes."

Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi and the others immediately understood what purpose Song YuanQiao was trying to induce with his words.

Zhang SanFeng still had one set of martial art skill that was extremely worthy of pride, it was called "Zhen Wu's Seven Spheres Formation." The Wu Dang sect offered worship to the deity Zhen Wu⁹, and when Zhang SanFeng saw the pair of statuettes comprising of a snake and a tortoise that was always situated in front the statue of Zhen Wu, he thought to the SheShan¹⁰ and GuiShan¹¹ located at the juncture between the Changjiang¹² and the HanShui River Valleys¹³. When he thought over the agile lightness of a long snake contrasted with the lumbering heaviness of a tortoise, he also thought to how the diety Zhen Wu was able to place his

leg on the shell of a tortoise while his right leg rested on the body of a snake, thus capturing the essence of the most lithe and cumbersome objects' fundamental nature. He immediately took off that moment, journeying through the night to arrive at the Northern areas of the HanShui River Valleys to study the two She and Gui mountains. Through the undulating twists of the SheShan and the stately stableness of the GuiShan, he was able to create an incredibly brilliant and mystical martial art skill.

However, the She and Gui mountains were so majestic in their force, that it caused the martial arts inspired by the intensity of the mountains to be so profound and boundless, that it encompassed a vast field and became something of which could not be fully implemented through one person's power. Zhang SanFeng quietly stood by the river's bank and for three days abstained from drinking a single drop of water or consuming a tiny morsel of food. He concentrated all his energies into mulling over this skill, yet was still unable to solve this problem. But during the early dawn of the fourth morning, he watched the sun rise from the East to cast a million streaks of wavering golden slithers and flickering spots of sparkling illuminations on the face of the river. He was suddenly enlightened and after engaging in a hearty laugh, he returned to the Wu Dang mountain and brought his seven disciples to him in order to relate a martial art skill to each one of them.

These seven different forms of martial arts when executed separately is of course each an embodiment of brilliance and exquisiteness in their own right, but if two people combine their efforts, the brothers can support and facilitate each other by simultaneously fostering their attack while maintaining their defence, causing their power to be increased even further. If three people simultaneously executed their moves, their power would be double that of

the combined effort of two individuals. The power of four people would equal to that of eight first rate fighters while five people amounts to the force of sixteen fighters and six fighters will be equivalent to thirty-two fighters. By the time they can gather the efforts of seven fighters simultaneously, it would be analogous to having the collective force of sixty-four of the present era's first-rate fighters attacking all at once. Within the present era, the number of martial artists who can be classified as a first rate fighter was merely a small list comprised of twenty or thirty people, what are the chances of having the opportunity to gather together all these first rate fighters? Even if they could be gathered together, within these fighters there were the good and the evil, the compassionate and the malicious, how could they possibly co-operate together as a group?

Because this skill of Zhang SanFeng's was inspired by the tortoise and snake statues that stood by the foot of deity Zhen Wu, it was therefore titled as the "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation." At that time, he painstakingly pondered over the difficulty in making up for the vacancy in the west end while one watched over the east, which would simultaneously afford opponents with the chance of taking advantage of the exposed vacancy in the Southern and Northern ends. It was only later when he came up with the solution of directing his seven disciples to execute this skill as a group was he finally able to resolve this problem. Although he couldn't help but be a little disappointed over the fact that this "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation" could not be worked out in such a way so as to enable just one person to executed it, but when he thought to, "If this skill really can be executed through the power of just one person, then wouldn't that mean just one person's power would be enough to defeat the combined force of sixty-four first rate fighters? Is that not a much too absurd and arrogant idea?" and couldn't help himself from laughing while being at a

complete loss of words.

Since the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang have made their name within the martial arts world, there has not been an encounter in which they were not able to achieve the upper hand. Regardless of how powerful of an opponent they may be pitted up against, the most they would require would be just the combined efforts of two or three brothers in order to conquer and be victorious. This “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation” has not been used even once. At the present moment, Song YuanQiao knew that they were faced with great adversaries, for nobody really knew exactly how powerful the three divine reverends of Shaolin were. Though he thinks that he may be able to equally tie one of them, these were nevertheless overconfident conjectures on his own part. It could very well be that he would be thoroughly defeated as soon as he struck out, which was why he was suddenly reminded of the treasured secret weapon of the Wu Dang sect, the never-been-used “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation.”

When he heard Abbot Kong Wen agreeing to fight the seven heroes of Wu Dang with seven Shaolin disciples, he then said, “We’d like to ask our respected guests to please wait here for a moment while we went and asked our third brother to find a successor right away in order to comprise the correct number for the seven disciples of Wu Dang.” Then with a look at Yu LianZhou and the others, the six brothers all respectfully bowed to Zhang SanFeng and asking to be excused before retreating into the inner rooms.

Muo ShengGu was the first one to speak, “Eldest brother, let us use the ‘Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation’ today and show those Shaolin monks the capabilities of a Wu Dang disciple. But who should we ask to replace our third brother?” Song YuanQiao replied, “I think concerning this matter, we

should all come to a decision together. Let us not say anything right now. Each one of us will write a name on our palms and then we'll see what the general consensus is." Muo ShengGu said, "Alright!" and immediately took out a pen which he handed over to Song YuanQiao.

Song YuanQiao wrote a few words on his palm and then clenched together his fists before handing the pen over to Yu LianZhou. Everyone took turns writing and then revealed their answers simultaneously. Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and Zhang SongXi all wrote the words "Fifth Sister." Zhang CuiShan wrote the two words "Zhuo Jing," whereas Yin LiTing's whole face had flushed a deep red while he refused to reveal his answer by tightly clenching together his fist. Muo ShengGu said, "Hey that's strange, what are you hiding?" and pried open his fist only to see that on his palm were written the words, "Miss Ji."

Zhang CuiShan was genuinely touched as he took Yin LiTing's hands and said, "Brother!" Everyone understood that Yin LiTing was being considerate of the fact that because Yin SuSu was just beginning to recover from her illness, it was thus not very suitable for her to engage in battle. Therefore he would rather ask Ji XiaoFu, his own future wife to participate in the battle instead. Muo ShengGu had originally wanted to tease him but Zhang CuiShan immediately shot him a look to prevent him. Song YuanQiao thus said, "Fifth brother, please go and ask sister to come out then."

Zhang CuiShan returned to his bedroom and brought out Yin SuSu before briefly outlining what the situation was like outside in the reception hall. Yin SuSu said, "The lives of the whole Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Hui Feng and the other Shaolin monks were all ended by me. But at that time, I still haven't met CuiShan yet. I don't want this incident to burden the Wu Dang sect anymore, let me go and tell them to go

and settle these scores with my father's Heavenly Eagle sect instead."

Zhang SongXi said, "Sister, why continue to differentiate between you and I at this point? Besides, I believe that though these people ascended the mountain today by using the Dragon Gate Escort Agency incident as their excuse, their true goal is to interrogate about Xie Xun. Similarly, their interrogation of Xie Xun for the purpose of revenge is again just another excuse, while getting their hands on the Dragon Saber comprises their true purpose." Muo ShengGu said, "Fourth brother's words are absolutely right. Their main desire is to covet the Dragon Saber, and regardless of what, they will try to force you to reveal the details of the treasured saber." Zhang CuiShan said, "Years ago, the Reverend Kong Jian told my brother Xie Xun that concealed within the Dragon Sabre was a martial arts manual that can render its practitioner invincibility and the ability to conquer and dominate the whole martial arts world. Since Kong Jian was aware of this secret, then Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing must also know as well."

Yin SuSu said, "If that is the case, I will follow eldest brother's every command. But your unworthy sister's martial arts are so lowly, how can I fully comprehend the brilliance of the 'Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation' in such a brief moment of time?"

Song YuanQiao replied, "In all honesty, by just combining the power of the six of us brothers to combat the seven Shaolin monks is already sufficient enough to secure our victory. But if sister you can participate on our third brother's behalf by acting as his successor, then I'm sure that he will be incredibly grateful."

The hearts of the six heroes of the Wu Dang all beated

together as one, and the purpose behind them asking Yin SuSu to participate in the battle was not for the sake of combating the adversaries, but rather it was for Yu DaiYan's sake. It should be understood that if the Six Heroes of Wu Dang combined their efforts to attack, the power of the "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation" would already be equivalent to the power of thirty two first rate fighters. Even if the three divine reverends did turn out to be very powerful, and even if there was some unknown first rate fighter amongst the disciples who accompanied them on this trip, yet even combining the power of all seven of them, it can be ascertained that there absolutely could be no way for them to turn out as being comparable to the combined power of thirty two first rate fighters. But ever since their master had taught them this "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation," they never had the chance to use it. Today, they will clench victory with just one battle and defeat all three divine reverends of Shaolin, if Yu DaiYan cannot share this victorious glory, melancholy will most definitely fill his heart. Therefore Song YuanQiao and the others wanted Yin SuSu to learn the stances from Yu DaiYan and stand in as his substitution. That way, when the legend of this battle gets passed down amongst the martial arts world in the future, Yu DaiYan can still be considered as having partaken a role in this battle even if he didn't physically join in, and they will still be spoken of as the "Seven Heroes of Wu Dang."

The mutual understanding and genuine compassion that the brothers held towards each other were all discerned by Yin SuSu through just two three words, and therefore she said, "Alright, then I will ask our third brother to teach me. But my martial arts is much too inferior when compared to the rest of you, I just hope that I won't get in the way and end up being a burden later." Yin LiTing said, "Don't worry, that won't happen. As long as you remember the steps and directions of the formation, that would already be good enough. Even if

you happen to forget anything during the battle, we will all be there to remind you.”

Therefore, the seven of them all went over to Yu DaiYan’s bedroom. Since Zhang CuiShan returned home, he has already had a few talks with Yu DaiYan, but because Yin SuSu was ridden with illness, it was only until now did she finally have the chance to officially go see Yu DaiYan.

When Yu DaiYan saw the elegant exquisiteness of her beautiful face and observed the gentle grace in her manners, he became very happy for his brother. Then he was filled with a desolate heartache when he heard Song YuanQiao say that she wanted to act as his substitution to participate in the “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation” which they will form in order to counter the three divine reverends of Shaolin. But he has been crippled for ten years now and have gotten used to many things. Therefore with a faint smile he said, “Sister, your third brother I don’t have anything good to give to you as a welcoming present. Now in this moment of haste, I can only relate to you the steps and directions of this formation. After the adversaries have retreated, I will explain to you in detail the variations and practicing methods to this formation.”

Yin SuSu replied with elated joy, “Thank you third brother.”

This was the first time that Yu DaiYan heard her open her mouth to speak, but when he suddenly heard her say the four words “Thank you third brother,” the facial muscles on his face began to contort and quiver uncontrollably while his two eyes stared blankly ahead, completely lost in thought. Zhang CuiShan asked with alarm, “Brother, are you not feeling well?” Yu DaiYan did not respond, but remained lost in a numbed, comatose state. There was a strange look in his eyes, an expression that communicated both pain and

hatred. It was as if he was suddenly reminded of one of the most hated experiences of his life.

When Zhang CuiShan turned around to look at his wife, he found that her expression had also changed suddenly as well, there was a mixture of horror and anxiety written all over her face.

Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and the others looked at Yu DaiYan and then looked over at Yin SuSu, not understanding why the expression of these two people would suddenly become so strange. Everyone's heart was filled with a premonition that something terrible would happen. The room had suddenly become a mass of oppressing silence, so quiet that the heartbeat of each person could almost be heard.

Yu DaiYan's breathing was heard to grow increasingly rapid, and a faint flush erupted over his pale cheeks. In a low voice he said, "Sister, please come over here and let me take a look at you." Yin SuSu's whole body was visibly shaking while she actually refused to approach Yu DaiYan. She only extended her arm to tightly cling onto her husband's arm instead.

After quite a while, Yu DaiYan sighed and said, "If you don't want to come over, that's fine as well. For I never did get to see your face that day anyways. Sister, can you please repeat these words after me, 'One, you must personally lead the escort. Two, you must take the package to the Xiang Yang city without any rest, so it will arrive in ten days. Three, should there be any problems, humph, I will kill every single person in your Dragon Gate Escort Agency.'"

When everyone heard him recite these words slowly, nobody could stop their bodies from breaking out into a cold sweat.

Yin SuSu ran forward a step and said, "Third brother, it truly

is remarkable of you to be able to recognize my voice. That day at Lin An City's Dragon Gate Escort Agency, the person who entrusted Du DaJin with the mission of bringing you back to Wu Dang mountain was your worthless sister I." Yu DaiYan said, "Thank you for your kindness sister." Yin SuSu continued, "Afterwards when the Dragon Gate Escort Agency fouled up along the journey, causing brother you to end up like this, it was also your sister I who went and completely annihilated their whole family, killing everyone including even the young and old." Yu DaiYan coldly asked, "For what reason did you treat me with such kindness?"

Yin SuSu's face was sombre as she gave a long sigh and said, "Third brother, since things have come to this stage, I can no longer conceal anything from you any longer. But I have to state ahead of time that in regards to this, CuiShan has been kept from the truth all along. I was afraid ... afraid that after he knows of the truth, he will never ... never care about me again."

Yu DaiYan quietly murmured, "Then you don't need to say anything. I've already become a useless cripple, there's no need to persist in chasing after the past. Why ruin the relationship between the two of you for someone like me? Now, all of you go! The six heroes of Wu Dang will combat the revered Shaolin monks, victory is at hand, do not let people think that the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang is merely an empty name."

Yu DaiYan's will was incredibly strong, and ever since he was injured, he has never moan or groaned with any form of bitterness. Originally, he couldn't even make any sounds for speech, and it was only through Zhang SanFeng's careful and skilled treatments of transferring the inner energy that he had cultivated throughout all these years into his body, was he finally able to gradually open his mouth for speech.

Yet he refused to mention a single word about what happened to him that day, and it was only today did anyone finally hear him utter these few indignant words of grief. After the brothers heard these words, there was not a single person whose blood was not boiling, while sounds of crying was furthermore heard to come from Yin LiTing.

Yin SuSu said, "Third brother, I know that you have already figured out the truth, but you're only refraining yourself from revealing it because you're taking into account of the love and friendship between CuiShan and you. It's true, that day on the waters of the QianTang River, the person who was hiding within the compartment of the boat and who used the Mosquito Needles to hurt you was your unworthy sister I ..."

Zhang CuiShan severely roared, "SuSu, was it really you? You ... you ... you didn't tell me this earlier!"

Yan SuSu replied, "The true culprit who injured your third brother was your very own wife. How could I possibly tell you that?" She whipped her head around again to face Yu DaiYan and said, "Third brother, afterwards, the person who concealed the Seven Stars Needles in their palms in order to wound you and cheat away the Dragon Saber in your possession was my very own brother Yin YeWang. Because there has never been any trouble or scores of vengeance between our Heavenly Eagle Sect and your Wu Dang Sect, and since we have already obtained the Dragon Saber and furthermore respect you as a venerable and tough man, we therefore asked the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to bring you back to the Wu Dang mountain. But the twists that suddenly appeared along the journey was not something we ever expected would happen."

Zhang CuiShan's whole body was shaking and fire seemed to be about to blaze out of his eyes. He pointed to Yin SuSu and

said, "You ... you really ruined me with a wicked lie."

Yu DaiYan was heard to suddenly give a loud scream while his whole body flipped off the bed boards. With a loud thump, he fainted while falling onto the ground. The four slabs of bed boards had broken simultaneously."

Yin SuSu took out her sword, rotated the handle around and handed it over Zhang CuiShan while saying, "CuiShan, we have been husband and wife for ten years now. To be sheltered by your compassion and be blessed by your profound love and genuine respect, I know that I can really die with no regrets now. Please kill me with one swipe of the sword in order to preserve the brotherly rightfulness between the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang."

Zhang CuiShan took hold of the sword and was just about to lurch forward to drive the blade through his wife's heart when in that brief flash, the last ten years all surfaced within his heart, all of the various attractive qualities such as her warm tenderness and devoted care, gentle affections and sweet sentiments. How could he possibly bring himself to pierce forward with that sword?

He remained in a state of dumbfounded shock for a moment, and then after suddenly giving out a loud scream, he dashed out of the room. Yin SuSu, Song YuanQiao and the others did not know where he wanted to go, so they all ran after him. They watched him tear out of the room and kneel on the floor in front of Zhang SanFeng, saying "Honoured master, your disciple I have made a terrible mistake, there's no possibly of it being rectified. I would only like to beg you of one thing."

Zhang SanFeng was not aware of what the situation was like, therefore said with a tender expression, "What is it? Just say it and there would be nothing your master would not do for

you.”

Zhang CuiShan knocked his head on the floor three times and said, “Thank you respected master, your disciple I have only one cherished son who has landed in the hands of evil villains. I would like to beg esteemed master you to rescue him out of the demons' lair and raise him into an adult.” He then stood up and ran forward a few steps before turning towards reverend Kong Zhi, Mr. Iron Zither He Tai Chong, Kong Dong Sect's Guan Neng, E-Mei Sect's revered nun Jing Xuan and the others, declaring in a loud and clear voice, “All crimes and sins are the doing of Zhang CuiShan's sole person only. A true man will always confront the consequences of their actions, today I'll give everyone a satisfying answer!” As he was saying these words, he lifted his long sword and drew it across his own neck. Bright red blood immediately gushed out as his life ended right there.

Zhang CuiShan's intentions of committing suicide was quite strong. He already predicted that his master and fellow brothers would act out to stop him the moment he drew his sword, therefore he purposely situated himself amongst the crowd of guests and stuck out immediately after he finished saying those two sentences.”

Zhang SanFeng, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi and Yi LiTing all screamed out while rushing forward at the same time. Banging sounds rang out consecutively as the body of six or seven people flew up into the air. These were all people of whom were surrounding Zhang CuiShan and whose bodies were all blown back by the force harboured within the palms of Zhang SanFeng and his disciples. But they were still too late. Zhang CuiShan's blade had already slitted through his throat, there was no possibility of salvaging the damage. Song YuanQiao, Muo ShengGu and Yin LiTing all came out slightly later, and of course would be even further away from

being able to stop Zhang CuiShan.

It was at this time when a young child's voice cried from outside the long window of the hall, "Papa! Papa!" These two cries seemed to be smothered, the mouth of this speaker was obviously being covered by someone else. With a sway of his body, Zhang SanFeng had already arrived outside the long window. All that was seen was a man dressed in the attire of a Mongolian war general, in his arms was a eight or nine year old boy. That boy's mouth was covered, but he was struggling to break free.

Zhang SanFeng's beloved disciple has just died a terrible death, and it was as if somebody has driven a knife into his heart. But due to his cultivation of nearly one hundred years, his thoughts still remained clear. He shouted in a low voice, "Get inside!" That man gave a tap with his left leg, and was just about to leap up onto the rooftops with the kid in his arms. But his shoulders immediately slumped while his whole body seemed to be suddenly held down by an incredible weight and he found that he couldn't even lift his two feet from the ground. What had happened was Zhang SanFeng had soundlessly approached the man and placed his left hand lightly on his shoulders. That man was incredibly petrified, for he knew that all Zhang SanFeng needed to do was expel some internal energy, and even if he doesn't die right away, he most definitely will be severely injured. Therefore, he could only follow his orders and enter into the reception hall.

That kid was indeed Zhang CuiShan's son, Zhang Wuji. His mouth was covered by that man, but from outside the long window he was able to witness very clearly how his father committed suicide with a slash of his sword. How could he possibly not be upset? He therefore broke free forcefully, and was finally able to release a loud scream.

Yin SuSu witnessed her husband commit suicide for her, but then suddenly she saw her son return without any harm. After her tremendous sorrow, followed great joy. She asked, "Child, did you tell them the whereabouts of your godfather?" Wuji held his head upright and said bravely, "Even if they kill me, I would not say a single word." Yin SuSu said, "That's a good boy, come and let me hold you."

Zhang SanFeng said, "Hand the child over to her." That man's whole body was controlled, and had no choice but to follow Zhang's orders and passed Wuji over to Yin SuSu.

Zhang Wuji fell into his mother's embrace crying, "Ma, why did they have to push my papa to commit suicide?" Yin SuSu said, "All these people here have come up onto the mountain because they wanted to force your father to kill himself." Wuji's little pair of eyes swept slowly from the left to the right once. Though he was young, but when everyone's eyes met up with his gaze, they couldn't help but feeling shaken within their hearts.

Yin SuSu said, "Wuji, you have to promise your mother one thing." Wuji said, "Ma, just say it." Yin SuSu said, "Don't rush to seek revenge, you have to be patient. But don't even let a single one of them go." When everyone heard these few cold words from her, they couldn't help but feel a cold chill brush across their back. Wuji was heard to cry, "Ma! I don't want revenge, I only want my papa to come back to life!"

Yin SuSu said tearfully, "When a person dies, there's no way of bring them back." Her body quivered ever so slightly as she said, "Child, since your papa has died, we may as well reveal your godfather's whereabouts to others." Wuji hurriedly said, "No, no we can't do that!"

Yin SuSu said, "Abbot Kong Wen, you are the only person whom I will reveal the secret to, please bring your ear closer." This move was out of everyone's expectations, and they were all surprised. Kong Wen said, "All is well, all is well! If only madam you were willing to reveal this earlier, fifth hero Zhang wouldn't have to die" and approached Yin SuSu, leaning his ear over.

Yin SuSu's lips moved a few times but was not heard to emit any sounds. Kong Wen asked, "What?" Yin SuSu said, "The Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun is hiding in ..." when she got to the words "hiding in" her voice became extremely muddled again, no audible sound was heard. Kong Wen asked again, "What?" Yin SuSu replied, "He is there, your Shaolin sect can go and find him yourselves."

Kong Wen frantically insisted, "I didn't hear anything" while he straightened his body and lifted his hands to scratch his head, a completely confused and lost expression on his face.

Yin SuSu laughed coldly and said, "I can only tell you that much. As long as you go there, you will most definitely find the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun."

She embraced Wuji and said in a low voice, "Child, when you grow up, you must take caution of woman tricking you. The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be." She then pressed her lips against Wuji's ears and whispered in an extremely soft voice, "I didn't tell that monk anything, I was only lying to him ... look at ... what a great liar your mother is!" and after a bitter, anguished laugh, her arms fell to her side as her whole body slumped down to the floor. What was immediately seen was the dagger that was stuck in her chest. She had already stabbed herself with this dagger when she was embracing Wuji, but because Wuji's body was blocking her front, nobody was able to detect it.

Wuji threw himself onto his mother's body and screamed, "Mama, mama!" But Yin SuSu had driven that dagger into herself a long time ago and had been able to hold up for quite a while already. By this time, she had eventually stopped breathing. Wuji was incredibly devastated, but not only did he not sob and cry, he actually glared at Abbot Kong Wen while asking, "It was you who killed my mama wasn't it? Why did you kill my mama?"

Having witness a series of life's great tragedies all at once, even Kong Wen, the sect leader of the present era's most revered martial arts sect couldn't stop himself from feeling incredibly shaken. After being interrogated by Wuji like this, he couldn't help but back up a few steps while frantically saying, "No, it wasn't me. She ... she was the one who killed herself."

Tears were rolling around in Wuji's eyes, but he exerted all his strength to force back these tears, muttering, "I won't cry, I will not let myself cry, won't cry in front of all you bad people."

The Abbot Kong Wen cleared his throat softly and said, "Grand Master Zhang, we never expected that ... ai ... ai ... that it would end up like this. Since fifth hero Zhang and his spouse has already committed suicide, then we will no longer continue to interrogate about the past. We will retreat now." After saying these words, he pressed his palms together and bowed, while Zhang SanFeng returned a bow and said coolly, "Forgive us for not seeing you out." All the Shaolin monks got up together, turned around and prepared to leave.

Yin LiTing shouted with anger, "You all ... you all force my brother to kill himself ..." but then he immediately thought, "Brother killed himself because he felt that he had wronged

third brother, it really wasn't their fault." Therefore having just uttered half a sentence, he didn't continue to finish it and only threw himself onto Zhang CuiShan's corpse, wailing loudly.

All the guests felt unease in their hearts as they all approached Zhang SanFeng to express their intentions of departing, while they were all thinking within their hearts, "This time, the bad blood has gotten really thick. The Wu Dang sect most definitely will not easily let us off the hook this time. There will be trouble in the future." Song YuanQiao saw the guests out, accompanying them outside to the temple doors with reddened eyes. As soon as they stepped foot outside, he turned his head around, his tears already pouring down. Within the reception hall, all that could be heard was the sobbing from everyone in the Wu Dang sect.

E-Mei sect was the last group to leave. When Ji XiaoFu saw how devastated YinLiTing was, her eyes also reddened as she approached him and said softly: "Sixth brother, I'm leaving now. Take... Take good care of yourself." Yin Liting's tears obscured his vision, as he lifted his head up and chokingly asked: "Did you ... did you from E-Mei Sect also come here to cause trouble for my Fifth Brother?" Ji Xiaofu hurriedly replied: "No. Our Master only wanted to ask Brother Zhang to reveal Xie Xun's whereabouts." She paused, bit her lip till blood flowed and tremblingly said: "Sixth brother, I ... I have wronged you. Take care of yourself. I will only be able to make it up to you in the next life." Yin Liting felt that what she said was rather excessive. He replied: "This was not your fault. We won't blame you." Ji Xiaofu was very pale as she said: "It's... it's not about this..." She did not dare continue talking to Yin Liting, so she turned to Wuji and said: "Good boy, we... we will all take good care of you." She removed her gold necklace/neck-band and tried to put it on Wuji, saying softly: "This is for you..." Wuji jerked his head away and said: "I

don't want it!" Embarrassed and left with the necklace/neckband in her hand, Ji Xiaofu was stunned. The tear that had been welling up in her eyes finally rolled out. Jingxuan Shi-tai frowned and said: "Ji Shi-mei, why do you have so much to say to a child? Let's go!" Ji Xiaofu hurried after her.

Wuji had been holding back, waiting for Jingxuan, Ji Xiaofu and the others to leave, so that he could cry his heart out. But suddenly, he could not breathe and collapsed to the ground. Yu Lianzhou quickly picked him up and held him in his arms, thinking that he had fainted because of his distress and trying to hold back his tears. He massaged Wuji chest a few times and said: "Child, just cry it out." But Wuji did not wake up. His body was as cold as ice and his breathing was weak. Yu Lianzhou channeled his internal energy into him, but Wuji still did not wake up. Seeing that Wuji looked about to die as well, everyone paled.

Zhang Sanfeng pressed Wuji's Lingtai acupoint and transferred his internal energy to him. With Zhang Sanfeng's current internal energy cultivation, unless a person was on the brink of death, no matter how severe his injury was he would definitely improve once he received Zhang Sanfeng's internal energy. But when the internal energy entered Wuji's body, his face turned from white to green and from green to purple, and Wuji shaking uncontrollably. Zhang Sanfeng felt Wuji's forehead, which was as cold as a block of ice. Alarmed, Zhang Sanfeng felt the centre of Wuji's back under his shirt and discovered that it was blazing hot like a fire was burning, while the rest of his body was a bone-penetratingly cold. If Zhang Sanfeng internal energy had not reached such an unfathomable level, he would have shivered upon coming into contact with the cold. He said: "Yuanqiao, where is the Tartar soldier who was carrying the child? Go and find him." Yu Lianzhou, remembering how he had been injured by the Mongol soldier and knowing that his eldest martial brother

was not his match, hurriedly said: "I'll come as well." The two of them left the hall together. When Zhang Sanfeng dragged the Mongol soldier into the hall, Zhang Cuishan had already committed suicide. This was followed by Yin Susu also committing suicide. In the midst of their grief, no one paid any attention to the Mongol soldier and he had fled.

Zhang Sanfeng tore upon Wuji's shirt to reveal a clear dark green colour palm-print on his back. Zhang Sanfeng gently touched his back. The area of the palm-print was burning hot, while everywhere else was icy cold. Zhang Sanfeng's hand felt uncomfortable. This injury of Wuji's was very severe.

Before long, Song Yuanqiao and Yu Lianzhou returned to the hall. They reported: "There are no outsiders on the mountain." When they saw the strange palm-print on Wuji's back, they were both shocked. Zhang Sanfeng frowned and said: "I had always thought that since Taoist Priest Bai Sun (100 Damages/Injuries) died thirty years ago, the Xuan Ming Divine Palms have been lost from this world. How could it be that there is still someone who knows this martial art?" Song Yuanqiao said with shock: "This child has suffered under the Xuan Ming Divine Palm?" He was the oldest, thus he had heard of the Xuan Ming Divine Palms. Yu Lianzhou and the other had never even heard of the name.

Zhang Sanfeng sighed, he did not reply. Tears running down his face, he held Wuji in his arms. He looked at Zhang Cuishan's corpse and said: "Cuishan, Cuishan, you studied under my tutelage and entrusted me with your last wishes. But I can't even save your only beloved son. What's the point of me living to a hundred? What's the point of Wudang Sect's fame resonating throughout the world? It would be better if I were dead!" His disciples were shocked. Since they had become his disciples, Zhang Sanfeng was always easygoing

and carefree. They had never heard him say such words of all-consuming despair.

Yin Liting asked: "Master, is there ... is there no hope of saving this child?" Zhang Sanfeng picked up Wuji in both arms, paced back and forth in the hall, and said: "Unless ... unless my Master Jueyuan comes back to life and passes the complete 9 Yang manual to me." The hearts of his disciples sank. Zhang Sanfeng's words meant that there was no way of treating Wuji's injury. Everyone was silent. Yu Lianzhou said: "Master, when I fought with that man previously, the force of his palm was very uncommonly vicious. I was injured then, but have made a full recovery." Zhang Sanfeng replied: "That was all due to the fame of the 'Seven Heroes of Wudang'. If the Xuan Ming Diving Palms are used on an opponent with more powerful internal energy, the force of the palms will reflect back onto the user and injure him. If you meet this man in the future, you must be very very careful."

Yu Lianzhou said: "Yes.". He shivered as he thought: "So that man held back during the fight, fearing that I was more powerful than him. He did not release the full force of the Xuan Ming Divine Palms, otherwise chances are that I would be dead now. If I meet him in the future, he will no longer hold back." He then thought: "I suffered and was injured by his palm. Wuji is so young, I'm afraid ... I'm afraid ..."

Song Yuanqiao remarked: "From the brief glimpse I had of that man, he was around 50 years old with a high nose and deep-set eyes. He looks like he is from the Western Regions." Mo Shenggu asked: "Why did that man kidnap Wuji only to bring him to our mountain?"

Zhang Songxi said: "The man tried unsuccessfully to force Wuji to answer his questions. So he used the Xuan Ming Divine Palms to injure Wuji. He wanted Fifth Brother and his

wife to see Wuji suffer with their own eyes, and so, cannot help but reveal the Golden Hair Lion King's location to him."

Mo Shenggu said angrily: "This man is really daring. How dare he come to cause trouble on Wudang Mountain." Zhang Songxi replied dejectedly: "Weren't there many people who came to cause trouble on Wudang Mountain today? Plus that man had Wuji under his control. He anticipated that we would spare the rat to save the dishes (ie hesitate to take action for fear of hurting an innocent party) and wouldn't dare to hurt him." The six of them sat in silence in the hall for a long while.

Wuji suddenly opened his eyes and cried: "Dad, dad, it hurts. It's very painful." He clutched Zhang Sanfeng tightly, with his head resting on Zhang Sanfeng's chest. Yu Lianzhou said sternly: "Wuji, your father has died. You have to live and learn some great martial arts, so you can avenge your father's death." Wuji cried: "I don't want revenge! I don't want revenge! I want daddy and mummy to come back to life again. Second Uncle, let's just let all the bad people go, and concentrate on saving daddy and mummy."

When Zhang Sanfeng heard these words, he could not help his tears rolling down again. He said: "We can all only try our very best. How long he lives will depend on heaven's mercy." He turned to Zhang Cuishan's body and cried: "Cuishan, Cuishan! What an unfortunate child."

He carried Wuji to his own room, where he sealed 18 major acupoints on his body. Wuji stopped shivering after his acupoints were sealed. The green shade of his face grew darker and darker. Zhang Sanfeng knew that when the green shade became black, Wuji would stop breathing and die. He took off Wuji's shirt, undid his own Taoist robe, and pressed his chest onto Wuji's back. At this time, Song Yuanqiao and Yin Liting were outside arranging Zhang Cuishan and Yin

Susu's funeral. Yu Lianzhuo, Zhang Songzi and Mo Shenggu came to their Master's room. They knew that he was using the 'Pure Yang Boundless Energy' skill to transfer the cold poison from Wuji's body to his own. Zhang Sanfeng had never married. Even though he was a hundred years of age, he was a virgin. He had cultivated this skill for eighty years. Because of all this, he had reached the pinnacle of this skill. Yu Lianzhou and the others waited by his side. About an hour later (half a shichen), Zhang Sanfeng's face turned green and his fingers began to tremble. He opened his eyes and said: "Lianzhou, you take over. When you can't bear it anymore, let Songxi take over. You must not continue."

Yu Lianzhou replied: "Yes." He removed his robe and held Wuji in his arms. When his flesh made contact with Wuji's body, he began to shiver. It felt like he was holding a piece of ice to his chest. He said: "Seventh brother, go ask someone to bring in a charcoal brazier. The hotter it is, the better." Not long later, the fire was lit. But Yu Lianzhou still found the cold difficult to bear.

Zhang Sanfeng sat by the side and slowly circulated his internal energy through three channels. He channeled his 'Yin Yun Zi Qi (Dense/enshrouding Purple Qi)' from in dantian to force the cold poison out of his body little by little. When he stood up after all the cold energy had been expelled, he saw that Mo Shenggu was holding Wuji. Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Songxi were sitting by the side in complete meditative focus, expelling the cold poison from their bodies. Not long later, Mo Shenggu could endure it no longer. He ordered a novice priest to ask Song Yuanqiao and Yin Liting to take over. From this technique of using internal energy to treat injuries, it became clear whose internal energy was strong and whose was weak. Mo Shenggu could not even tolerate it for the time it took to have a cup of hot tea. Song Yuanqiao was able to endure for the time it took to burn two

incense sticks. When Yin Liting carried Wuji in his arms, he yelled loudly and his whole body shivered uncontrollably. Zhang Sanfeng ordered with alarm: "Give the child to me. Sit down, regulate your breathing and clear your mind of all thoughts." Yin Liting had been hit so hard by Zhang Cuishan's death that his mind and thoughts were in disarray. He had to calm his thoughts down before he could continue.

In this way, the six of them took turns over three days and three nights of relentless effort to reduce the cold poison in Wuji's body. Each person's turn gradually became longer and longer. After the fourth day, they could finally steal a few moments of sleep. After the eighth day, each person would spend four hours a day treating Wuji injury. They could then gradually recover their own strength.

At first, there was great progress in Wuji's condition. His body grew less cold, his spirits improved and he began to eat and drink. Everyone thought that he could be saved. But on the 36th day, Yu Lianzhou found that no matter how he tried to generate energy, he could not draw out a single bit of the cold poison in Wuji's body. But his body was still as cold as ice and the green tinge in his face remained. Yu Lianzhou assumed that his own strength was not sufficient, so he went to tell his Master about it. Zhang Sanfeng tried, but he too was unsuccessful. During the next five days, all six of them tried every method they could think of, with no success.

Wuji said: "Tai shifu (Grandmaster), my arms and legs are warm, but the top of my head, my chest and abdomen are growing colder and colder." Zhang Sanfeng was inwardly frightened, but he soothed him saying: "Your injury is now better. We won't need to hold you every day anymore. Just sleep on my bed for now." He then carried Wuji to his own bed to sleep.

Zhang Sanfeng and his disciples went out to the hall. He sighed: "The cold poison has seeped into the top of his head, his chest and his dantian (the area below the belly-button, where internal energy is stored). It cannot be drawn out with external strength. It looks like our hard work over these thirty-plus days has been in vain."

He brooded for a long while, thinking: "Outsiders can no longer help him draw out the cold poison from his body. If he cultivates the unparalleled internal energy technique in the '9 Yang Manual', he may then be able to use the Yang to disperse the Yin. But when my late Master Jueyuan imparted the Manual to me, I was unable to learn it fully. Even after meditating in seclusion the last few times and trying to work it out, I can only comprehend about 30 to 40 per cent of it. For now, I can only teach him to practice the skill. If he can live an extra day, let him have that extra day."

So he taught the techniques and the formula of the 9 Yang Manual to Wuji. The skill had many complicated variations and could not be taught all at once. He started by teaching Wuji the 'Da Zhou Tian Ban Yun' (Heaven transporting everywhere), to circulate the warm energy from the dantian to the ren, du and chong meridians through the 'Yin Xiang Wei Lu (Guide Yin Through the Back Door) Gate'. And after that, to divide the energy into two and channel it through the lower back to the 'Lu Lu (Windlass) Gate' located on both sides of the fourteenth spinal bone. From there, the energy would be directed to the 'Yu Zhen (Jade pillow) Gate' on the back, shoulders and neck. This was called 'Ni Yun Zhen Qi Tong San Guan' (transporting the energy in reverse through three gates). After that, the energy would be directed through the 'Bai Hui (Hundred Meetings)' acupoint at the top of the head, divided into five streams, and channeled through the whole body through the 'Shan Zhong' acupoint. The energy would then be divided into two again, before

coming back together in the dantian. After one complete cycle, there would be a sweet feeling in the body and the energy in the dantian would feel like incense smoke was curling upwards and circulating freely around. (Translator's note: I have no idea what Jin Yong is talking about here. Translation might not be accurate)

This was called 'Yin Yun Zi Qi (Dense/enshrouding Purple Qi)'. When the Yin Yun Zi Qi was practiced to a high level of achievement, the cold poison in the dantian would be expelled. There was no great difference between each school's internal energy principles, but each school's method of practice was different. The method taught by Zhang Sanfeng was extremely powerful and could be considered the best in the world. Zhang Wuji practiced this technique for two years, developing a significant amount of Purple Qi (Yin Yun Zi Qi) in his dantian. However, the cold poison in his body stuck firmly within his meridians and would not be dispersed. The green tinge in his face grew more noticeable each day. Each time the cold poison attacked, his suffering worsened.

During these two years, Zhang Sanfeng painstakingly watched over Wuji's internal energy cultivation. Song Yuanqiao and the others went in search of precious medicines, hundred year old ginseng, mature Chinese knotweed (*Polygonum multiflorum*), mountain Fuling (*Wolfiporia extensa*), and other types of rare herbs. Wuji consumed all of these, but the effect was like throwing a rock into the ocean. Everyone watched him become thinner and more sickly. Even though Wuji put on a brave and cheerful front, they all could not help but feel despondent, thinking that in the end, they would not be able to save Zhang Cuishan's only heir.

Wudang Sect were preoccupied with caring for Wuji, so they had no time to search out their enemies who had injured Yu

Daiyan and Wuji. During these two years, the Heavenly Eagle Sect Leader Yin Tianzheng had, a few times, sent people over to visit his grandson and deliver many valuable presents. However, the Wudang Heroes hated the Heavenly Eagle Sect for indirectly bringing disaster upon Yu Daiyan and Zhang Cuishan. Each time a representative from the Heavenly Eagle Sect arrived, the presents were rejected. On one occasion, Mo Shenggu even fiercely beat up one of the representatives. After that incident, Yin Tianzheng stopped sending people over.

During the Mid-Autumn festival, the Wudang Heroes and their Master got together for a celebration. Before the banquet could begin, Wuji suddenly became ill. His face turned green and the cold surged through his body. He did not want to ruin the festive atmosphere, so he gritted his teeth and endured the pain. But who could fail to see what was happening? Yin Liting took Wuji to his room, covered him with a blanket and lit a big fire. Zhang Sanfeng suddenly said: "Tomorrow I'll take Wuji to the Shaolin Temple in Songshan." Everyone understood what his intention was. In order to save Wuji's life, he had no other alternative but to humble himself and personally beg Shaolin's Abbot Kong Wen for help to fill the gaps in the 9 Yang Manual.

Two years ago on Wudang Mountain, Shaolin and Wudang fostered a deep enmity between them. Zhang Sanfeng was a senior master of already a hundred years of age. To now surrender his position of honour and go begging for help was a big disgrace for him. Everyone knew that from now onwards, Wudang would be unable to raise their heads with pride everytime they met Shaolin. But because of their love and relationship with Zhang Cuishan, they were willing to put aside their pride. E-Mei School too had a portion of the 9 Yang Manual, but their Headmaster (Zhang Men) Mie Jue Shi Tai's character was extremely strange. Zhang Sanfeng had

written a few letters to her and ordered Yin Liting to deliver them. However, Mie Jue Shi Tai did not even open the envelopes and merely sent them back. It looked like that apart from humbling themselves before Shaolin Sect, there was no other alternative.

If Song Yuanqiao led his martial brothers up to Shaolin to beg for help, that would be better for Wudang's face. But Reverend Kong Wen would never have revealed the secrets of their 9 Yang Manual to them. When everyone thought about how the mighty Wudang School would be humbled before Shaolin from now on, they all felt depressed. Instead of enjoying the banquet and the festivities, they simply drank a few cups of wine in melancholy before cleaning up.

Early the next day, Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji set out on their journey. His five disciples initially wanted to follow along, but Zhang Sanfeng said: "If so many of us go, Shaolin School is definitely going to become suspicious. It will better if only the two of us, one old and one young, go."

Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji mounted black horses and headed north. Shaolin and Wudang Schools were located quite close to each other. It only took a few days to travel from Wudang in Hubei to Shaolin in Henan. After Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji crossed the Han River, they arrived in Nanyang. They then traveled north to Ruzhou, then turned to the west and headed for Mt. Song. When they reached Mt Shaoshi (a mountain the Song Shan range, Shaolin is located at its foot), they tied their horses to a tree and continued on foot. Zhang Sanfeng reminisced about the past – how over eighty years ago, his Master Jueyuan ran away from Shaolin while carrying him and Guo Xiang inside a pair of buckets. With a heart heavy with regret, he held Wuji's hand and walked up the mountain slowly. He saw that the Five Peaks (of Mt Song) and the Pagoda Forest were unchanged, but Jueyuan, Guo Xiang and the rest had long passed away.

The two of them reached a pavilion and looked at Shaolin Temple. They saw two young monks talking and laughing while walking towards them. Zhang Sanfeng stopped them and asked: "Please report that Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Mountain humbly requests a meeting with the Abbot."

The two monks were shocked when they heard Zhang Sanfeng's name. They looked at him to size him up. What they saw was a very tall man with a silver beard, a shiny red face, a kindly smile and wearing a filthy green Taoist robe. Zhang Sanfeng was carefree and never paid attention to his appearance. When he was a young man, some people in the Jianghu called him the "Scruffy Priest" behind his back. Others called him "Scruffy Zhang". Then later on, when Wudang's martial arts were great and its name famous, no one dared to call him such.

The two monks thought: "Zhang Sanfeng is the founding master of Wudang School. Wudang is on par with our Shaolin School. Could it be that he has come to make trouble and to fight?" They saw that he was accompanied with a skinny, green-faced boy of around eleven to twelve years old. Neither of them looked special and the monks could not see any power or prestige. One of the monks asked: "Are you really Wudang's Ven... Venerable (Zhang Zhen Ren - respectful form of address to a Taoist priest)?" Zhang Sanfeng laughed: "Yes I am, I wouldn't dare be an impersonator." Listening to him, the other monk felt that he did not have the bearing of the founding master of a school and disbelieved him even more. The monk asked: "You are really not joking?" Zhang Sanfeng laughed: "What is so special about Zhang Sanfeng? What is the use in impersonating him?" Half believing and half not believing him, the two monks quickly returned to the temple to report.

After quite a long time, the temple door opened and Abbot Kong Weng, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing came out. The three men were followed by about ten old monks in yellow robes. Zhang Sanfeng knew that these were the Damo Hall Elders, who may even be from a more senior generation than the Abbot. They stayed in the temple and studied martial arts, with not a care of the outside world. It was likely that they only accompanied the Abbot out when they heard that the Head of Wudang Sect, who was no ordinary person, had arrived.

Zhang Sanfeng left the pavilion, bowed and said: "How could I trouble the Abbot and all the Reverends to come out and welcome us?" Kong Wen and the others put their hands together and bowed Buddhist-style. Kong Wen said: "Venerable Zhang has come from a far, it is really beyond my expectations. What instructions do you have for me?" Zhang Sanfeng replied: "I have a request to make." Kong Wen said: "Please sit, please sit."

Zhang Sanfeng sat down in the pavilion and some monks served tea. Zhang Sanfeng could not help thinking with annoyance: "Regardless of anything, I am still the founding master of a Sect and your senior. Why am I not invited into the temple, but merely made to sit here halfway up the mountain? Let's not talk about me, it would not even be appropriate for them to treat any other guest in this manner." But he had an open-minded personality, so he did not take it to heart.

Kong Wen said: "Venerable Zhang, you have humbled yourself by coming to our mountain. By right we should invite you into the temple. But you left Shaolin Temple as a young man. You would know that our rules dictate that all disciples who forsake our Sect or are expelled are not permitted to enter the temple again. If they do, they will be subject to punishment." Zhang Sanfeng laughed and said:

“So that’s the reason. When I was young, all I did was attend to Reverend Jueyuan performing tasks like sweeping floors and making tea. Since I never shaved my head or entered into any master’s tutelage, I could not be considered a Shaolin disciple. Kong Zhi replied coldly: “But you nevertheless secretly learnt Shaolin martial arts.”

Anger surged through Zhang Sanfeng, but he thought: “Wudang’s martial arts are the product of my diligent work and study. But if Reverend Jueyuan had not taught me the ‘9 Yang Manual’ and Heroine Guo had not given me the Shaolin Iron Lohans (Arhats), the martial arts that came later would not have come into being. So it is not wrong to say that my martial arts originate from Shaolin.” So he calmed down and said: “It is regarding this matter that I came here today.”

Kong Wen and Kong Zhi glanced at each other, thinking: “Why did he come here? He can’t have good intentions. It is more likely than not that he is here over Zhang Cuishan’s death.” Kong Wen said: “Please elaborate.” Zhang Sanfeng replied: “Reverend Kong Zhi said that my martial arts originated from Shaolin. What he said is not wrong. At that time, I was Reverend Jueyuan’s attendant and learnt the 9 Yang Manual. But the Manual was too profound. As I was very young then, I was unable to learn it completely. This is one of my deepest regrets. When Reverend Jueyuan recited the Manual on that remote mountain, there were three fortunate people who heard him. One of E-Mei School’s founder Heroine Guo, one was your honourable school’s Reverend Wuse, and the last person was me. I was the youngest and had the least ability. I also had no martial arts foundation. So among the three sects, I probably absorbed the least.”

Kong Zhi said coldly: “That may not necessarily be the case. Venerable Zhang attended to Jueyuan when you were young. How could it be that he did not secretly pass on the skills to you? Wudang’s fame of today is all down to Jueyuan’s

efforts.” Jueyuan was three generations more senior than Kong Zhi. By right, Kong Zhi should have called him “Martial great-granduncle”. But after Jueyuan escaped from Shaolin, he was considered an expelled disciple of Shaolin and his name had been removed from the list of disciples. So in his anger, Kongzhi simply dispensed with manners. Zhang Sanfeng stood up and respectfully said: “I have never forgotten my late master’s debt of kindness to me.”

Among the Four Great Monks of Shaolin, Kong Jian was the most merciful, but unfortunately he passed away the earliest. Kong Wen was a person of deep thoughts, who did not openly display his emotions. Kong Xing was simple-minded and naïve, he did not pay attention to the affairs of the world. Kong Zhi was temperamental and narrow-minded. He had always felt that Zhang Sanfeng had stolen Shaolin’s martial arts. He could not help feeling angry that Wudang’s name was renown through the world. Furthermore, before Yin Susu died, she pretended to tell the whereabouts of Xie Sun to Kong Wen. This ‘Moving Disaster to Jiangdong’ scheme was very devious. During the last two years, Wulin fighters had incessantly come to Shaolin every two or three days to find out about Xie Xun’s location. Some of them came openly, others furtively and some pleaded, while others demanded. Kong Wen swore and insisted that he did not know where Xie Xun was. But that day in Wudang’s Zi Xiao Palace/Hall, hundreds of people from many sects had seen Yin Susu whisper in Kong Wen’s ear. No matter how Kong Wen tried to explain, nobody believed him. Because of this, battles were fought a few times each month, causing many injuries and deaths on both sides. When all things were considered, how could Shaolin lay the blame on anyone but Wudang? The monks had been suppressing their anger for the last two years. Beyond their expectations, Zhang Sanfeng turned up on their doorstep so they vented their anger and insulted him. Kong Zhi said: “Zhang Sanfeng has admitted stealing

martial arts from Shaolin Temple, it is a pity that there are no witnesses to hear it. Otherwise this would be spread through the wulin for everyone to know.”

Zhang Sanfeng said: “All the martial arts under heaven are from the same family. For hundreds and thousands of years, the strengths of some have been incorporated to offset the weakness of others (“take from the long to patch up the short”). We can no longer differentiate the true origins of each martial art. But Shaolin School has been recognized as the leader of the wulin for the last few hundred years. I came here today because I admire your noble school’s martial arts. Knowing I have not reached that level, I came to learn a few things from you, the various reverends.”

When Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others heard Zhang Sanfeng say “I can to learn a few things from you”, their expressions changed as they thought he was trying to challenge them to a fight. They thought this old priest had cultivated his skills for a hundred years, so his martial arts must be without measure. There was no one who was his match in the whole wide world, and he feared no one. Who knew what sort of peerless martial arts he had been practicing during the last two years? The three monks were momentarily silent.

Finally Kong Xing said: “Good Old Priest, so you want to test our abilities. I, Kong Xing, am not afraid of you. Shaolin has hundreds and thousands of monks. You may not necessarily be able to defeat us all.” Though he said he was “not afraid”, in his heart he was truly afraid. So he came up with this idea of attacking Zhang Sanfeng with hundreds and thousands of monks.

Zhang Sanfeng hastily clarified: “Please don’t misunderstand me. When I said learn a few things, I really meant that I came to ask for some pointers. I have been practicing the ‘9 Yang

Manual' that my late master passed on to me, but there are few things that I don't understand so I have not mastered it all. Shaolin has many monks who have reached a profound level of cultivation. If Shaolin is willing to teach me, you will have Zhang Sanfeng's eternal gratitude." As he said this, he stood up and made a deep bow."

These words of Zhang Sanfeng were far outside the expectations of the Shaolin monks. His martial arts were without equal, he was the founder of a school and had practiced and cultivated for ninety years. Among the denizens of the wulin in this era, there was no grander name. His status was so high that no one was his equal. The monks could never have imagined that Zhang Sanfeng would now come to Shaolin to beg for instruction. Kong Wen hurriedly bowed and said: "Venerable Zhang, you must be joking. We, your juniors, have shallow knowledge. We cannot measure up to the saying 'the stone of the mountain studies the jade' (this is a proverb that basically means "to remedy one's defects by learning from other's strenghts"; ie their level of learning is so low/inferior that they cannot measure up to that). How can we give you any pointers?"

Zhang Sanfeng knew that the whole matter appeared very strange. It would be difficult for the monks to understand and trust him, so he told them the whole story right from the beginning - how Wuji was injured by the Xuan Ming Divine Palms and how they had failed to purge the cold Yin poison from his body despite trying everything. He also spoke of how Wuji was Zhang Cuishan only beloved son, and that no matter what, he had to save Wuji's life. He said that the current situation was that apart from learning the complete '9 Yang Manual', there was no other way. He offered to relate the part of the 9 Yang Manual that he had learnt in exchange for Shaolin's part, in order to form a more complete whole.

After Kong Wen heard this, he pondered about it for a while. Then he replied: "Shaolin has 72 martial art skills, but in all our history, not a single Shaolin disciple has been able to master more than twelve. Though Venerable Zhang's knowledge is incomparable, there are far too many martial arts that have been passed on to us by our humble school's ancestors. It would be extremely difficult to even learn ten percent of it all. Venerable Zhang's suggestion of exchanging the 9 Yang Manual with us is very generous, but another skill is really surplus to our requirements." After a while, he added: "Wudang School's martial arts originate from Shaolin. If we exchange our skills today, in the future the ignorant denizens of the Jianghu will say that Shaolin has benefited from Venerable Zhang. As the head of Shaolin, I cannot allow that to happen."

Zhang Sanfeng's heart sank, thinking: "You are the head of the Wulin's number one school and the first of the Four Divine Monks. Yet, you are narrow-minded and only have the interests of your school at heart." But as someone who had come seeking a favour, he could not speak his mind. So he said: "You three are the divine monks of this era and merciful. This child is dying. I hope that you'll have the saving heart of Buddha and fulfill our request. I will be much obliged." But no matter how he tried to persuade them, the three monks politely declined.

Finally, Kong Wen said: "I can only act according to our rules, please do not take offense." He turned around and instructed a monk: "Tell the kitchen to prepare a vegetarian banquet. We will entertain Venerable Zhang here." The monk acquiesced and left. Zhang Sanfeng's face darkened. He raised his hand and said: "In that case, I have come here in vain. I do not dare partake in the feast. My apologies for bothering you, please do not take offence." He bowed, took Wuji's hand and departed.

End of Chapter 10.

Notes

[←1]

A commonly known 'brand' of paper - 'Xuan' should be in reference to a place.

[←2]

Like 'Xuan paper' was a brand of ink stones. 'Duan' should be in reference to a place.

[←3]

Just a phrase used to describe people who were messing around with a powerful force/person and not even realizing the consequences.

[←4]

'Yun' means 'Cloud' while 'He' means 'Crane.'

[←5]

The “Jiu” in “Gong JiuJia's” name means “Nine.”

[←6]

'Shou' means longevity.

[←7]

One of the three main towns in WuHan which is the capital of the HuBei province.

[←8]

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin': The "Kong" that comprises the first character in the 4 Reverends names is the same character for "emptiness." While the four names of the Reverends ranks as "Jian, Wen, Zhi, Xing." "Jian" meaning "See," (Kong Jian was killed by XieXun more than ten years ago) "Wen" meaning "Hear," "Zhi" commonly means "Intellect," although along with the word "Xing" (meaning "Instincts") may possibly take on more profound meanings in Buddhist vocabulary.

[←9]

The 'Zhen Wu Da Di' is also called the 'Xuan Wu Da Di' or 'Xuan Tian Shang Di' which are sometimes translated as the 'Dark Lord of the North.' It was said that he was the eighty-second reincarnation of the highest deity in the Taoist pantheon 'Tai Shang Lao Jun' (or Supreme Master Lao/Supreme Patriarch of Taoism/Celestial Lord of Virtue who was born as 'Lao Zi' and credited with being the founder of Taoism). Born as a Crown Prince, he later left his kingdom to retreat to the Tai He mountain (which later became known as the Wu Dang mountain) to seek for enlightenment. After 42 years, he finally achieved immortality and transcended to the heavens. He was thus crowned by the Jade Emperor of the Heavens as the 'Tai Xuan' to rule over the Northern sphere. According to ancient Chinese astrological myths, the heavens were divided into 28 different houses of constellations ('Xiu'). These 28 different houses were further grouped into 4 groups (North, South, East West) and were assigned a specific animal 'form' (known as the 4 forms). The constellation group in the North was known as the 'Xuan Wu' ('Xuan' meaning black and referring to the snake, while 'Wu' refers to the shell of the tortoise). Thus Zhen Wu Da Di came to be known as the Xuan Wu Da Di. It was said that the Jade Heavenly Emperor later renamed the Tai He mountain to the Wu Dang mountain in honour of this deity ('Wu' from Xuan Wu, 'Dang' meaning 'managed'/'controlled' to indicate that this mountain was under the sole control of Xuan Wu).

[←10]

'She' means 'Snake' while 'Shan' refers to mountain. Also called the 'HuangHe Shan' (the Yellow Crane mountain). It Faces Gui Shan.

[←11]

'Gui' meaning turtle. Also known as the 'LuShan.'

[←12]

Also known as the Yangzte River.

[←13]

the greatest river branch of the Yangzte river.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Chapter 11 - A woman whose tongue is sharp as spear

(Translated by Meh and Huang Yushi*)

*Courtesy of Wuxiapedia.com



An unshaven, burly man rowed the boat in an urgent manner. A little boy and a little girl sat with him on the boat. The boat behind them is bigger, with four lamas and seven or eight Mongolian officers on it. The officers all helped the sailors peddle the boat, allowing the boat to move much faster. The burly man's strength is also quite amazing, rowing the small boat at great speed. Nonetheless, due to superior manpower, the bigger boat kept gaining on the smaller boat. When they got close, the lamas and the officers picked up bows and began to shoot at the smaller boat.

(Translated by Meh)

Zhang SanFeng and Zhang Wuji walked down the Shao Bao Mountain. Realizing that Zhang Wuji's condition is terminal, Zhang SanFeng stopped talking about possible cures. He simply tried to help Zhang Wuji pass time by chatting with him. On this day, they reached the Han River. And the two took a boat across. The boat floated on the water, wavering gently back and forth. Like the boat, Zhang SanFeng's heart also wavered back and forth.

Zhang Wuji suddenly said, "Grand-master, don't be sad. When I die, I'll get to see mama and papa again." Zhang SanFeng said, "Don't say that. No matter what, your grand-master going to save you." Zhang Wuji said, "Actually, I really wished I could've learnt Shaolin's 'Art of Nine-Yang', so I can teach it to Third Uncle Yu." Zhang SanFeng asked, "Why?" Zhang Wuji said, "I had hoped that once Third Uncle Yu learnt both Wu Dang and Shaolin's 'Art of Nine-Yang', his injury could heal."

Zhang SanFeng sighed, and said, "Your Third Uncle's injuries are external. No amount of inner power can cure him." He then thought, "This child knows that he's about to die, yet he is not afraid of death. Instead, he thinks about the welfare of

others, a very kind indeed.” Just about to compliment him, Zhang SanFeng suddenly heard a booming voice, “Stop the ship immediately. Hand over the child, and I’ll spare your life. Otherwise, don’t blame me for being ruthless.” This voice came from far down the river, yet one can hear the words clearly. Obviously, this person has strong inner power.

Zhang SanFeng chuckled, thought, “Who would dare ask me to hand over the child?” Raising his head, only to see two boats getting near. Upon closer examination, an unshaven, burly man rowed the boat in an urgent manner. A little boy and a little girl sat with him on the boat. The boat behind them is bigger, with four lamas and seven or eight Mongolian officers on it. The officers all helped the sailors peddle the boat, allowing the boat to move much faster. The burly man’s strength is also quite amazing, rowing the small boat at great speed. Nonetheless, due to superior manpower, the bigger boat kept gaining on the smaller boat. When they got close, the lamas and the officers picked up bows and began to shoot at the smaller boat.

Zhang SanFeng thought, “Oh, so they wanted that burly man to hand over the child.” He despises Mongolians killing Hans very much, and instantly decided to help out this burly man. Only to see this man’s left hand continue to paddle, while his right hand raised the other paddle to knock down the oncoming arrows. Zhang SanFeng thought, “This man’s kung fu is quite formidable. How could I not help such a hero in trouble?” So he then said to his boatman, “Sir, let’s go help him.”

The boatman was scared out of his wits from watching the scene. He tried his best to stay away from the confrontation. So when the boatman heard Zhang SanFeng’s words, he said in shock, “Old... priest. You’re... kidding, right?” Realizing that they have no time to waste, Zhang SanFeng snatched

the paddles from the boatman, and began to row towards the other two boats. Suddenly, he heard a loud scream, as an arrow struck the back of the little boy on the small boat. The burly man then immediately lost his poise, as he hurriedly turned to look at the boy's wounds. At this moment, two arrows hit him on the shoulder and back. With the arrow wounds, the burly man could no longer hold on to the paddles, and they dropped into the water. The boat soon stopped. The bigger boat quickly caught up, as the officers and lamas jumped onto the smaller boat. That burly man did not surrender, however. Instead he fought them with all his energy.

Zhang SanFeng yelled, "Stop, filthy Mongols. I won't allow you to hurt anyone!" As his boat got close, Zhang SanFeng jumped into the air towards the burly man's boat.

Two officers shot arrows at him. But with a wave his sleeve, Zhang SanFeng easily whisked the arrows away. As he landed, Zhang SanFeng's left palm shot out. Two officers immediately fell down into the water. Upon seeing this, the other officers and lamas immediately froze from the shock. The head officer said, "Old priest, what do you want?"

Zhang SanFeng yelled, "Filthy Mongols! Trying to do more evil, hurting more civilians? Get out of here!" That officer said, "Do you know who he is? He is a remaining member of Yuan Province Devil Cult rebels, a wanted outlaw!"

Zhang SanFeng gasped upon hearing the words 'Yuan Province Devil Cult rebel'. He thought, "So this man is Zhou ZiWang's subordinate?" He turned and asked the burly man, "Is he speaking the truth?"

That burly man's whole body filled with blood, as his left hand clutched the little boy, and cried, "They... they killed

little master.” This sentence confirmed his identity.

Zhang SanFeng said in shock, “Is this Zhou ZiWang’s son?”

That burly man said, “That’s correct. I could not carry out my order, so what’s the need to keep on living?” He slowly put down the boy’s body, and then attacked an officer. But he’s already injured, plus the arrows are poisonous. So even before he could fully get up, he fell down onto the deck.

At this time, the little girl rushed towards a man’s body in the cabin, crying, “Papa! Papa!” Looking at the clothing on the body, Zhang SanFeng figured this man must be the boatman.

He thought, “If I had known the Devil Cult was involved, I wouldn’t have gotten interfered. But I can’t back out now.” So he said to the officer, “The boy’s already dead. The other man’s already seriously injured, and will die soon. Since you’ve already accomplished your task, you can surely leave!” That officer said, “No, I have to get their heads.” Zhang SanFeng said, “Why be so excessive?” That officer said, “Who are you, old priest? What gives you the right to intervene in this matter?” Zhang SanFeng chuckled, and said, “Who cares who I am? Everyone has the right to intervene in all matters.”

That officer gave his subordinates a gesture, and said, “What is your Taoist title? Which temple do you reside in?” Before Zhang SanFeng could respond, two other officers quickly raised their sabers, and attacked him. These two officers were already quite close to Zhang SanFeng. Plus, due to the small space of the boat, Zhang SanFeng had nowhere to evade.

But he quickly turned to the side, and with a quick twist of the body, dodged the sabers. His two palms quickly shot out, reaching the backs of the two officers, and yelled, “Get back

there!" As the palms connect, the two officers flew out, landing in the middle of the large boat they came from. Zhang SanFeng hasn't fought anyone in ages. But felt a bit unsatisfied simply beating up on these mediocre fighters.

That officer in charge gasped, and stuttered, "You... you... could you be...?" Zhang SanFeng swept his robe, and yelled, "This old priest only kills Mongols!" The lamas and officers immediately felt a strong wind bearing down hard on them, preventing them from breathing. After the wind passed, their faces all turned white. All of them then quickly returned to the large boat.

Zhang SanFeng took out a pill and put it in the burly man's mouth. Then he rowed the boat to his own. Just as he's about to help the burly man switch boats, he saw the burly man carry the boy's body in one hand, the little girl in the other, and stepped to the adjacent boat. Zhang SanFeng thought, "Despite heavy injuries, this man still cares for his little master. His loyalty is very admirable. Although I didn't mean to save him, this man is certainly worth saving." He then helped take out the arrows out of the burly man, and applied medicine to the wounds.

That little girl watched her father's body float away with his boat, and cried incessantly. The burly man said, "Those damn Mongols are really vicious. The first thing they did was to kill the boatman. If you hadn't gotten here in time, this girl would have likely died too."

Zhang SanFeng thought, "Right now, with Wuji having trouble moving, and this man being a wanted man. If we use the old river dock and seek lodgings there, I'd have trouble taking care of both people." He took out three taels of silver and gave them to the boatman, said, "Sir, can you row east to the Tai Ping area? We'll seek lodgings there." That

boatman was already in awe of Zhang SanFeng after watching him defeat those Mongols. So when Zhang SanFeng gave him so much money, he quickly complied, and began to row east.

That burly man got on his knees and kowtowed to Zhang SanFeng, said, "Thank you so much for saving my life. Chang YuChun [1] pays you his respect." Zhang SanFeng quickly helped him up, and said, "Hero Chang, you don't need to be so courteous." Upon touching Chang YuChun's hand, Zhang SanFeng found it to be icy cold. He asked in shock, "Is Hero Chang injured internally?" Chang YuChun said, "As I escorted little master down south, I fought against the Mongols four times. A lama managed to land two palm strikes on me, once on the chest and once on the back.

Zhang SanFeng checked his pulse, only to find it quite weak. He then opened Chang YuChun's clothing, saw a heavy mark left by a palm strike, meaning the injury is quite serious. Any other man would've not have been able to hold up for such a long time. But this man managed to travel all the way here, battling along the way. Only a true hero can do something like this. Zhang SanFeng quickly ordered Chang YuChun to stop speaking, and to rest in the cabin.

That little girl is around ten. Her feet are bare, and her clothing's tattered. Despite being a boatman's daughter, she was an incredible young beauty, as she sat there in tears. Zhang SanFeng asked her, "Little girl, what's your name?" That girl said, "My surname is Zhou. My name is Zhou ZhiRuo." Zhang SanFeng thought, "For a boatman's daughter, she does certainly have an elegant name." He asked, "Where is your home? Is there anyone else in your family? I'll have this boatman take you back home." Zhou ZhiRuo said in tears, "I live with my dad on the boat. I... I have no other relatives." Zhang SanFeng sighed, and

thought, "Looks like she's an orphan. What should I do about her?"

Chang YuChun said, "Old priest's kung fu is incredible. May I ask for your title?" Zhang SanFeng said, "I'm called Zhang SanFeng." Chang YuChun gasped loudly, sat up, and yelled, "So you are Wu Dang's venerable Priest Zhang. No wonder your martial arts is so incredible. I'm really lucky to have to have met such a divine priest today."

Zhang SanFeng said with a smile, "You're too flattering. I simply happened to have lived a few extra years. Certainly not worthy of being 'divine'. Hero Chang, please lie back down." Seeing Chang YuChun's straightforward and sincere demeanor, Zhang SanFeng found himself liking this man quite a lot. But due to Chang YuChun's Devil Cult roots, Zhang SanFeng did not wish to talk too much with him, and said, "Your injury's very serious. Don't talk if you don't have to."

Because of his experience, Zhang SanFeng tends to be quite unbiased towards both the righteous and the devilish sects. He even once told Zhang CuiShan "You must never look down on others just because you reside in the position of the so-called righteous sect. The two words of 'good' and 'evil' were originally hard to differentiate. A member of the orthodox sect when harboring thoughts of impurity and immorality will be considered as a wicked villain, and similarly if a member from the evil sect harbors a heart that is completely directed towards goodness, then that person is a gentleman." But after Zhang CuiShan's suicide, Zhang SanFeng has grieved much for the loss of his disciple, and felt great enmity towards the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Remembering his third disciple's crippled condition, his fifth disciple's death, both due to the Heavenly Eagle Sect, Zhang SanFeng couldn't help but feel extra painful in regards to the

word 'devil'.

That Zhou ZiWang is Elder Mi Le's disciple of Devil Cult, or "Ming Cult" [2] . Many years ago, he started a revolution in the Jiang Xi province, proclaiming himself Emperor, calling his dynasty 'Zhou'. It was soon destroyed by the Yuan troops, and Zhou ZiWang was executed. Although Elder Mi Le and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are different groups of people, they both originated from the Ming Cult. When Zhou ZiWang rebelled, Yin TianZheng also stirred up much trouble in the Zhe Jiang province. Zhang SanFeng rescued Chang YuChun today was only a spur of the moment decision, before asking about Chang YuChun's identity.

It was already dark when they arrived at the town. Zhang SanFeng bought four dishes from a restaurant, chicken, pork, fish, and vegetables, and they ate on the boat. Zhang SanFeng told Zhou ZhiRuo and Chang YuChun to go ahead and eat, while he would feed Zhang Wuji. Chang YuChun asked him why. Zhang SanFeng responded by saying that he had sealed Zhang Wuji's pressure points around the vital organs, to prevent the poison from getting in. In his depressed state, Zhang Wuji didn't want to eat. And when Zhang SanFeng tried to feed him, he would simply shake his head.

Zhou ZhiRuo took the bowl from Zhang SanFeng's hand, and said, "How about let me take care of this little friend, while you go ahead and eat?" Zhang Wuji said, "I don't need to eat. I'm already full." Zhou ZhiRuo said, "Little friend, if you don't eat, the old priest would be too unhappy to eat. If he won't eat, then wouldn't he be hungry?"

Zhang Wuji realized that she's right, and ate the food Zhou ZhiRuo put by his mouth. Zhou ZhiRuo carefully removed all the bones from the fish and chicken, and sweetened the

meat with the sauces. So they tasted very good. Zhang Wuji quickly finished a whole bowl of food.

Zhang SanFeng thought, "Considering his crippling illness, and that both his parents are dead, Wuji really should have a attentive girl to serve him."

Chang YuChun did not touch the meat dishes. Instead, he quickly finished the vegetable dish. Even with the injury, he ate four big bowls of rice. Zhang SanFeng urged him to eat some meat. Chang YuChun responded, "Venerable Zhang, I'm a devout Buddhist. I don't eat meat." Zhang SanFeng said, "Oh, that's right. I forgot." He immediately remembered, the Devil Cult has very strict rules, forbidding its members to eat meat. This has been true since the Tang Dynasty. Near the end of the Northern Sung Dynasty, the leader of the Ming Cult rebelled in the Zhe Dong province. At the time, the people called them 'Vegetarian Devil Honoring Cult'.

Because the two big rules of the Ming Cult are to never eat meat, and to always honor the Devil. Under attacks from the government and the martial world, the disciples of the Ming Cult began to hide their identities. So they always say they are devout Buddhists to cover their vegetarian ways.

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang, you saved my life, and already knows my background. So there's no need for me to hide it. I am indeed a member of the Ming Cult. The government thinks of us as rebels. The righteous sects look down upon us, thinking we're just a bunch of bandits, or that we're minions of the devil. But for you to save me, even knowing who I am, I really don't know how to repay for your kindness."

Zhang SanFeng knows about the origins of the Devil Cult. The God they worship is called 'Mu Ni'. But the worshipers

call him 'Honorable Brightness'. When the cult spread into the central plains in the Tang Dynasty, it was called 'Mu Ni Cult', and also 'Cult of the Illuminating Light'. Its worshippers called it the 'Ming Cult', but others call it the Devil Cult. Zhang SanFeng sighed, and said, "Hero Chang..."

Chang YuChun quickly cut in, "Venerable priest, you really don't need to call me a 'hero'. Just call me YuChun." Zhang SanFeng said, "Alright. YuChun, how old are you?" Chang YuChun said, "Twenty."

Zhang SanFeng said, "You're just becoming an adult. So although you've entered the Devil Cult, you haven't sunk in too deeply. You can still get out before it's too late. I have a few words that you may not like. Do you want to hear them?" Chang YuChun said, "Of course. I'd love to hear any advice from Venerable Zhang."

Zhang SanFeng said, "Good! I want you to leave the Devil Cult. If you like Wu Dang, I'll have my eldest student Song YuanQiao take you in as his disciple. This way, you can later walk the martial world with your head up, as no one will ever look down upon you again."

As the head of the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang, everyone knows the famous Song YuanQiao. Normally it's almost impossible for people to even see him. The seven Wu Dang heroes recently began to take in students. But they have very strict standards. Only the most upright youngsters with great potential are admitted. As a member of the Devil Cult, a cult most people frown upon, this really is a once in a lifetime opportunity for Chang YuChun.

Yet his response was, "I deeply thank you for your offer. But since I am already a member of the Ming Cult, I cannot ever leave." Zhang SanFeng tried to persuade him some more, but Chang YuChun would not waver.

Zhang SanFeng finally gave up, shook his head, and sighed. Then he said, "This girl..." Chang YuChun said, "Don't worry. This girl's father died because of me. I'm definitely going to take care of her." Zhang SanFeng said, "Alright. But you cannot let her enter your cult." Chang YuChun said, "I really don't know what we do that make us so despicable in your mind. But if you insist, I'll obey your wish."

Zhang SanFeng held Zhang Wuji in his arms, and said, "Then let us part now." He really doesn't want any more to do with the Devil Cult, and therefore left out the words 'See you later'.

Zhou ZhiRuo said to Zhang Wuji, "Little friend. You need to eat everyday, so the old priest won't worry about you." Zhang Wuji's tears came out, and said, "Thank you for your words. It's just that... I'll only be able to eat for just a while longer." Zhang SanFeng cleaned out Zhang Wuji's tears with his sleeve. Zhou ZhiRuo asked in shock, "What? You... You..." Zhang SanFeng said, "Little girl, you have a kind heart. I hope you'll later go on the route of righteousness, and not of evil."

Zhou ZhiRuo said, "Ok. But this little friend, why does he say that he can only eat for just a while longer?" Zhang SanFeng could not respond.

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang, considering your martial arts abilities, surely you can cure this little friend's poison, right?" Zhang SanFeng said, "Of course I can." But he then shook his left hand behind Zhang Wuji, pointing out that Zhang Wuji is beyond help, but doesn't want him to know it.

Upon seeing Zhang SanFeng shaking his hand, Chang

YuChun gasped. He said, "Due to the severity of my injuries, I was just about to go see a very distinguished doctor. How about I take this little friend with me?" Zhang SanFeng shook his head, said, "His cold poison has already entered the vital organs. It's not something normal medicine can cure. We only... only hope to slowly disperse the poison." Chang YuChun said, "But the doctor I'm talking about has the ability to bring back the dead."

Zhang SanFeng suddenly remembered a person, and asked, "Are you talking about the 'Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley'?"

Chang YuChun said, "That's right. So you know about Elder Hu too?"

Zhang SanFeng thought, "From my knowledge, this 'Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley', Hu QingNuo, does indeed have unparalleled medical skills. But he is member of the Devil Cult. Besides, he has a very strange temper. He'll do his best to cure any Devil Cult followers, and not ask for a single penny. Yet he will not treat anyone else, no matter how much money is offered. Therefore, he has another nickname, 'Rather See Death Than Help'. If so, it's really better for Wuji to die than to enter the Devil Cult."

Seeing the grave expression on Zhang SanFeng's face, Chang YuChun understood what he's thinking, and said, "Venerable Zhang, I know Elder Hu never treats outsiders. But since you saved my life, I'll do anything I can to make Elder Hu break the rule this one time." Zhang SanFeng said, "I know just how amazing this Doctor Hu's skills are. But unfortunately, this cold poison on Wuji's body is very unique..." Chang YuChun said, "But you can't cure him. The worst that can happen is that Elder Hu can't cure him either. If he's going to die regardless, what's the big deal?" Chang YuChun is a straightforward person, and therefore said what

he thought.

Zhang SanFeng pondered a bit, "He's right. Look like Wuji only has about another month to live. What is there to be afraid of?" Zhang SanFeng has always been a very sincere person, and normally never thinks about possible hidden motives. But Zhang Wuji is his disciple's only child. How could he give Wuji to a member of the Devil Cult? At this moment, he really doesn't know what to do.

Chang YuChun said, "I know Venerable Zhang doesn't want to go see Elder Hu. After all, how could a head of a righteous sect seek help from us evil cults? Besides, with Elder Hu's strange temper, he'd probably offend you. I guess the only way is for me to take Brother Zhang to Elder Hu. Then I'll come to Wu Dang Mountain to be your hostage. Should anything happen to Brother Zhang, you can go ahead and kill me."

Zhang SanFeng chuckled, thought, "Should anything really happen to Wuji, how would killing you help? Besides, how can I be sure you'll definitely come to Wu Dang?" But considering Wuji's condition, there really isn't any other possible cure. So Zhang SanFeng said, "If so, then please take care of Wuji. But I must make two things clear. Mr. Hu cannot force Wuji into your cult. And Wu Dang is not going to accept your gratitude on this matter." He knew that the Devil Cult is very devious and strange in its ways. Being associated with them could only lead to big problems. After all, isn't Zhang CuiShan's death a perfect example?

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang is really belittling my cult. But if you say so, I'll obey." Zhang SanFeng said, "Take good care of Wuji. Should he ever recover, take him back to Wu Dang. But there's no need to come to Wu Dang as a hostage." Chang YuChun said, "I'll do all I can to follow your

wishes.”

Zhang SanFeng said, “As for this little girl, I’ll take her back to Wu Dang Mountain.”

Chang YuChun then went to a large tree by the shore, and dug a hole with his saber. Then he took off all of Little Master Zhou’s clothes, before burying him in the ground, and paid his respects. Burying members naked is one of Ming Cult’s rules. Everyone enters the world naked, and should therefore leave the world the same way. Since Zhang SanFeng does not know this rule, he found the burial procedure quite repulsive and mysterious.

The next morning, Zhang SanFeng took Zhou ZhiRuo in his hands, and parted with Chang YuChun and Zhang Wuji. After the death of his parents, Zhang SanFeng was like a grandfather to Zhang Wuji. So Zhang Wuji couldn’t help but burst into tears as they parted. Zhang SanFeng said, “Wuji, when you’re healthy again, your Big Brother Chang will take you back to Wu Dang Mountain. Be a good boy. We’ll only be apart for a few months. Don’t be so sad.” Despite his words, Zhang Wuji’s tears did not stop.

Zhou ZhiRuo returned to the boat, took out a handkerchief from her sleeve, and began to wipe away his tears. She then smiled at him, put the handkerchief into his pocket, before returning to shore.

(Translated by Huang Yushi from the 2nd edition of the original Chinese text:)

Zhang Wuji followed his grand-teacher with his eyes as the old man walked westwards with Zhou Zhiruo. As the same time, the little girl kept turning back and waving until both of them disappeared behind a row of poplar and willow trees.

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji felt so lonely that he started to cry again.

"Brother Zhang, how old are you this year?" asked Chang Yuchun with frown. When the boy answered that he was already twelve, the man said, "I see. A twelve-year-old is no longer a child, so are you not ashamed to sob and cry like a baby? When I was twelve, I had already been beaten several hundred times, but never did I shed a single tear. A man sheds only blood, you know, not tears. If you continue to cry like a girl, I will have to hit you."

"I cried because I could not bear to part with Grand-teacher," said Zhang Wuji. "If someone hit me, I would not cry at all! Go ahead and hit me if you dare. I will return each of your punches with ten punches of my own someday."

Chang Yuchun was stunned. "Good for you!" he said with a hearty laugh. "Now that is what I call a man with integrity. Since you are so formidable, I will not to hit you."

"Why not?" asked Zhang Wuji. "After all, I cannot even move a single finger."

Chang Yuchun laughed again and replied, "If I hit you today, what am I going to do when you eventually learn martial arts from your grand-teacher? How would I be able to endure ten punches from the exquisite fist techniques of the Wudang School?"

A smile appeared on Zhang Wuji's face: This Brother Chang may look very ferocious, but he is not a bad man.

Hiring a riverboat, the two travelled all the way to Hankou before switching to a larger vessel and sailing east down the Great River. The Butterfly Valley where the Healing Sage Hu

Qingniu lived was located on the banks of Nüshan Lake in northern Anhui.

The Great River flowed in a south-easterly direction from Hankou to Jiujiang, before turning northwards into the province of Anhui. Two years earlier, Zhang Wuji had sailed up this very river on his way to Mount Wudang. He had his parents and Yu Lianzhou as companions then, so the journey had been filled fun and laughter. Now, his parents were both dead, and he was on a joyless trip to seek treatment with Chang Yuchun. The difference between the two were as stark as the sky above and the land below. But he did not dare to let his tears fall, fearing that Chang Yuchun would be angered again. By then, all the acupoints that Zhang Sanfeng had blocked earlier had returned to normality, so he could actually feel each excruciating attack of the toxins in his body. Yet, there was nothing that he could do, except to grit his teeth in endurance until his upper and lower lips were all cut and bruised. To make things worse, the bouts became more frequent and painful with each passing day.

When they reached the Gua Pier after Jiqing, Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji went ashore and travelled north in a hired carriage. Several days later, they arrived in the town of Mingguang, east of Fengyang. Chang Yuchun knew that his Uncle Hu did not like his secluded place of abode to be widely-known, so he sent the carriage away about twenty li (10 km) from Nüshan Lake. Then, carrying Zhang Wuji on his back, he tackled the final leg of the journey on foot.

He thought that these last twenty li would be covered in the blink of an eye, but he had travelled only one li (500 metres) when his nerves and bones started to ache terribly. His breathing became laboured and he found it very difficult to even walk. The internal injuries that he had sustained after being struck twice by the foreign monks were worse than he

had realised.

Feeling very apologetic, Zhang Wuji said, "Brother Chang, let me walk on my own. You had better not tire yourself out."

"I can cover a hundred li (50 km) in a single breath without feeling tired at all," Chang Yuchun snapped, "so how could those stupid monks stop me with two strikes of the palm?" Gathering up all his strength, he forced himself to march forward. Unfortunately, he was already too wounded to push himself in this manner, and the frustration that he felt just made things worse. After several zhang or so (1 zhang = 3.33 metres), he began to feel as if his limbs and bones were falling apart. Yet, he was not ready to admit defeat. He was also unwilling to put Zhang Wuji down or to sit and rest. So, he laboured on, a step at the time.

This, of course, made their progress terribly slow. By nightfall, they had not covered even half of the targeted distance. The rugged terrain only served to make the walk more difficult, but they trudged on until they reached some woods. Then, Chang Yuchun finally put Zhang Wuji down and collapsed spread-eagle on the ground. After a simple meal of sugared fruit and biscuits, Chang Yuchun rested for half a shichen (one hour) before voicing his desire to resume the journey. Zhang Wuji tried his best to persuade the man otherwise, suggesting that they could spend a peaceful night in the woods and set out the next morning instead. By and by, Chang Yuchun realised that it would probably be midnight by the time they reached Butterfly Valley. Hu Qingniu would certainly be very irritated by their visit at such an hour, so he gave in to his companion's suggestion to stay in the woods. They soon fell asleep leaning against a large tree.

At midnight, Zhang Wuji was jolted awake by another attack of the toxins in his body. He started to shiver and shake

badly, but he endured the pain in silence for fear of waking Chang Yuchun up. Just then, the sounds of clashing weapons drifted into the woods, followed by several voices that shouted, "Where are you going?" "Block the eastern route and force him into the woods!" "We cannot let this crooked baldy get away this time!" Footsteps sounded as several people ran towards the trees.

Waking up with a start, Chang Yuchun grabbed his sabre with his right hand and Zhang Wuji with his left. Then, he waited to see if he should fight or flee.

"I do not think that they have come for us," the boy whispered.

Nodding in agreement, Chang Yuchun peered through the trees and saw seven or eight people attacking an unarmed man from all sides. Although the man managed to fend his enemies off with a pair of swift palms, the group began closing in on him after a while.

By and by, a crescent moon appeared from behind the clouds and cast a silvery light on the scene. The man in the centre of the circle was a tall and thin monk in his forties who was dressed in a white robe. His attackers consisted of two grey-robed monks, two Taoists, two men in secular attire and two slim-built women. The grey-robed monks had a pole and a sabre between them, which they used with such power that leaves flew everywhere in the woods. One of the Taoists had a sword which glinted under the moonlight as he waved it about, while one of the men in secular attire -- a short and small-sized fellow with a pair of swords -- rolled back and forth on the ground, attacking the legs of the white-robed monk with Ditang swordplay, a technique that focused on the lower extremities of the body.

The two women had a sword each, through which they executed a series of very swift but fluid strokes. As the battle wore on, one of the women turned in such a way that part of her face was lit up by the moonlight. The sight almost had Zhang Wuji blurting out: "Auntie Ji!" Indeed, she was none other than Yin Liting's fiancée, Ji Xiaofu.

Initially, Zhang Wuji thought that it was very unfair for so many people to attack the monk at once, and hoped that the hapless victim would be able to free himself. However, after recognising one of the attackers as Ji Xiaofu, he decided that the white-robed monk was a bad man. After all, he was an enemy of the Auntie Ji who had comforted him on the day of his parents' suicide. Although Zhang Wuji did not accept the necklace that she had given him, he was nevertheless very grateful for her kind thoughts.

As the white-robed monk's strokes alternated by fast and slow, and real and false, Zhang Wuji quickly realised that he was actually a highly skilled pugilist. There were also too many variations to his techniques to be identified, especially when the movements were speeded up. As a result, Ji Xiaofu and her group could not gain the upperhand despite being larger in number and battling for a long time.

Suddenly, one of the men shouted, "Use the projectiles!"

The other man and one of the Taoists responded at once, leaping to the left and the right respectively before sending a flurry of pellets and flying daggers towards the white-robed monk. As the monk scrambled to deal with the weapons that fell like rain around him, the other Taoist -- a fellow with a long beard -- shouted, "Monk Peng, we do not want your life, so why are you fighting us with all your might? Just hand Bai Guishou over and we will part with a smile. Would that not be better for everyone?"

Chang Yuchun was shocked. "So this is Monk Peng?" he wondered in a whisper.

Zhang Wuji was surprised too, for he had heard his parents tell his Second Uncle Yu about the incident on Wangpan Island and the resulting inter-clan vendettas upon returning to China two years earlier. Therefore, he knew that Bai Guishou, the Leader of the Eagle Sect's Xuanwu Circle, was the only one who had left Wangpan Island with his mental faculties intact. In recent years, many clans and organisations had taken the Eagle Sect to task because they wanted Bai Guishou to reveal where Xie Xun was. Consequently, Zhang Wuji thought: Could this Monk Peng be a member of my mother's sect as well?

Just then, Monk Peng said in a loud voice, "Circle-Leader Bai has been grievously wounded by all of you and I have a friendship with him that goes back a long way. To tell you the truth, even if I did not know him at all, I would still not ignore a dying man."

"What dying man?" roared the Taoist with the long beard. "We do not want his life, for we just want to find out where a certain person is."

"Since you want to know where Xie Xun is, why do you not go and ask the abbot of the Shaolin Temple?" said Monk Peng.

One of the grey-robed monks stepped up and shouted, "That is but an evil ploy to shift blame to my Shaolin Temple by that witch from the Eagle Sect, Yin Susu. Who believes her?" Apparently, this monk was from the Shaolin School.

The mention of his mother's name filled Zhang Wuji with both pride and sorrow: Although my mother has passed away

for two years, she can still make all of you dizzy with trouble!

Suddenly, one of the Taoists shouted, "Everybody, get down!" As his companions fell on their faces, five flying daggers cut through the air towards Monk Peng's chest. These weapons could be avoided if the monk bent forward, fell on his face or leaned backwards at once, but his attackers had pre-empted his moves by positioning their weapons around him at ground-level. So how could he escape then?

As Zhang Wuji watched with bated breath, Monk Peng leapt into the air and the five flying daggers went by under his feet. The two grey-robed Shaolin monks and the Taoist with the long beard responded to this turn swiftly, slashing Monk Peng's legs with their pole, sabre and sword. Forced to strike back, the white-robed monk sent a palm into the head of one of the Shaolin monks before snatching his sabre and using it as a lever against the other monk's pole to push himself two zhang (6.66 metres) away from the fray.

The Shaolin monk who was struck on the head died at once. His angered companions set off in pursuit of Monk Peng, only to see his legs crumple beneath him in his haste to get away. As the group surrounded the white-robed monk once more, the remaining Shaolin monk shouted, "You killed my brother, so I am going to make you pay for it!"

"Wait!" said the Taoist with the long beard. "His legs have been struck my Scorpion-Tail Hook (Xie1 Wei3 Gou1), and he will soon die of poisoning."

Sure enough, Monk Peng's legs wobbled as he strove unsuccessfully to stand up.

Chang Yuchun thought: He is an important member of my Ming Sect, so I must rescue him! Although he was seriously

wounded himself, he was so bent on helping Monk Peng that he took a deep breath and stepped forward. Unfortunately, the breath and the step that he took affected his internal injuries so much that he almost fainted from excruciating pain. By then, Monk Peng had collapsed on the ground after managing to move another zhang (3.33 metres) away from his attackers. He looked as if he had died of poisoning. Opening his eyes despite the massive pain in his chest, Chang Yuchun saw that none of the seven dared to approach the body of the monk.

The Taoist with the long beard said, "Brother Xu, test him with two of your flying daggers."

The other Taoist responded by throwing a dagger each into Monk Peng's right shoulder and left leg. The white-robed monk did not move, indicating that he was indeed dead.

"What a pity! What a pity!" said the Taoist with the long beard. "He has died, but we do not know where he has hidden Bai Guishou!"

The group stepped forward for a closer look.

Suddenly, five swift smacks were heard, followed by the sight of five people falling away from the circle. Monk Peng was on his feet in a flash, but the daggers were still embedded in his shoulder and leg. It turned out that he had pretended to die in a bid to draw his enemies closer, so that he could catch them unaware with the lightning-fast 'Flying Clouds in the Great Wind' Palm Technique (Da⁴ Feng¹ Yun² Fei¹ Zhang³). He had gathered up all his strength in silence as he lay on the ground, so the five strikes were so strong that they left a palm-print each on the chests of the five male victims.

Ji Xiaofu and her older sister-at-arms, Ding Minjun, were

terribly shocked at this unexpected turn of events, but they managed to leapt away on time. When they looked at their five wounded companions, they found them throwing up mouthfuls of blood. The two men in secular attire even screamed in pain, for their bodies were not as strong as the other three.

The Taoist with the long beard said, "Ding-guniang, Ji-guniang, stab him quickly with your swords!"

Among the nine of them, one Shaolin monk was already dead, and Monk Peng and five others were seriously wounded. Thus, Ji Xiaofu and Ding Minjun were the only two left unharmed. Ding Minjun thought: Hmmph! Am I so poor in the sword that you must tell me how to use it? Then, she raised her weapon and slashed at Monk Peng's shin with a move called 'Splitting Metal with a Nominal Stroke' (Xu1 Shi4 Fen1 Jin1).

Monk Peng heaved a long sigh, closed his eyes and waited for death. Suddenly, a loud clang was heard, as if two weapons had come into contact with each other. Opening his eyes, Monk Peng saw that Ji Xiaofu had used her sword to deflect her sister's blade.

"Why?" asked Ding Minjun in surprise. "Elder Sister," answered Ji Xiaofu, "Monk Peng held his hands back in mercy, so we should not push him over the edge."

"What hands of mercy?" Ding Minjun retorted. "His hands had run out of strength!" Then, she turned to the monk and said, "Monk Peng, my sister is very kind to spare your life, so you should tell us where Bai Guishou is."

Monk Peng threw head back and roared with laughter. "Ding-guniang, you have really underestimated Peng Yingyu," he

said. "Zhang Cuishan, the Fifth Warrior of the Wudang School, would rather die of suicide than reveal his sworn brother's whereabouts. Although I am not as talented, I admire loyalty and courage of Zhang the Fifth enough to follow his example." Then, he threw up a mouthful of blood and sank to the ground.

Ding Minjun walked up and kicked him three times in the waist, so that he could not launch another stealth attack at them.

Peng Yingyu's words brought a surge of warmth and gratitude into Zhang Wuji's heart, and the boy suddenly felt as if he had found a close relative. After his father, Zhang Cuishan, committed suicide, members of renowned and upright organisations often spoke of the man in this manner: "He was an outstanding young warrior who took one wrong step and became involved with a heretical witch. As a result, he died in personal ruin and shame, and brought humiliation to the Wudang School." Zhang Wuji had never heard these exact words, of course, but he could gather as much from the conversations and attitudes of his grand-teacher and uncles. Besides being deeply grieved, they had blamed his mother for the terrible things that had happened. They had felt that everything about his father was good, except for the mistake he made in marrying his mother. No one had ever expressed admiration and respect for his father like Peng Yingyu just did.

Ding Minjun sneered and said, "Zhang Cuishan was blind to marry that heretical witch. This is what I call 'willing self-degradation', so what good is there to learn from it? His Wudang School ... " At this point, Ji Xiaofu tried to interrupt her sister, only to hear Ding Minjun say, "Do not worry. I will not include Yin the Sixth in this." Then, pointing her sword at Peng Yingyu's right eye, she added, "If you do not speak up, I

will poke your right eye out before doing the same to your left. Then, I will poke through your right ear and the left one. After that, I will slice your nose off, for I will not allow you to simply drop dead." The tip of her sword glinted barely half a cun (1.67 centimetres) away from Peng Yingyu's eye.

The stubborn monk opened his eyes wide in defiance and said in a calm voice, "I have heard that the Abbess Mie Jue of the E-mei School is cruel and ruthless in her ways, so her students should be no different. Since I have fallen into your hands, go ahead and show me E-mei's best techniques!"

Ding Minjun raised her eyebrows and screeched, "Crooked baldy, how dare you ridicule my school!" She pushed her sword forward and gouged out Peng Yingyu's right eye. Then, she placed the tip of the blade on his left eye-lid.

Peng Yingyu laughed as blood poured out of his blinded right eye. Then, he opened his good left eye as widely as he could and glared at Ding Minjun until goosebumps appeared all over her. "You are not from the Eagle Sect," the woman said, "so why are you giving your life up for Bai Guishou?"

"This is one of the principles of being a man," answered Peng Yingyu. "You would not understand it even if I told you."

Ding Minjun could see that Peng Yingyu had no strength left to fight back, but somehow, he still regarded her with much disdain. As a result, she pushed her sword into his left eye in a fit of anger, only to have Ji Xiaofu knock the blade away with a nimble stroke.

"Elder Sister," said the younger woman, "this monk is so stubborn that he will never say anything, regardless of what we do to him. Killing him will not serve our purposes either."

"He said that our teacher is cruel and ruthless in her ways," Ding Minjun replied, "so I am just showing him what 'cruel and ruthless' really means. Heretics like him can only bring harm to others, so having him killed is a good thing."

"He is also a tough man," Ji Xiaofu added. "Elder Sister, I think we should just let him go."

Ding Minjun burst into a fit. "One of these two brothers from Shaolin is dead, while the other is wounded," she said in a loud voice. "The two Taoists from Kunlun are badly injured, while the two brothers from the Haisha Clan are in an even worse condition. Is he not brutal enough? I will gouge out his left eye before continuing with the interrogation." As soon as the word 'interrogation' left her mouth, her sword moved towards Peng Yingyu's left eye.

Ji Xiaofu raised her sword and pushed her sister's blade away with another light and nimble move. "Elder Sister," she said, "this man has no strength left to resist. If word of how we treat him gets out into the realm of the rivers and lakes, the reputation of our E-mei School will be adversely affected."

"Stand aside, and do not intervene!" said Ding Minjun in a stern voice. When Ji Xiaofu persisted, the older woman said, "Since you acknowledge me as your Elder Sister, you must listen to what I say. Stop nagging me!"

"Yes!" Ji Xiaofu responded, prompting Ding Minjun to send her sword into Peng Yingyu's left eye again. This time, she increased the power of her move by three-tenths.

Somehow, Ji Xiaofu found herself being unable to accept her sister's action, so she raised her sword and deflected the other blade once more. The power in Ding Minjun's move caused the younger woman to use a heavier hand as well, so the two swords impacted in a flurry of sparks. As their arms

went numb, both women took two steps back.

"What exactly are you up to, protecting this evil monk time and again?" shouted Ding Minjun angrily.

"Elder Sister," answered Ji Xiaofu, "I would like to suggest that you stop torturing him in this manner. We should just take our time and ask him slowly where Bai Guishou is."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "Do you think that I do not know what is in your heart? Ask yourself honestly: Why do you keep on declining the requests of Wudang's Yin the Sixth to complete the rites of marriage? And why did you run away from home after your father asked you to do the same?"

"What has my personal affairs to do with this matter?" asked Xi Jiaofu. "How could you link them together?"

"We know the truth in our hearts," answered Ding Minjun, "so I need not pull the scabs from your sores in front of all these outsiders. You may be in E-mei physically, but your heart is in the Evil Sect."

Ji Xiaofu turned white at once. "I respect you as my Elder Sister-at-Arms," she said with a trembling voice. "I have never offended you, so why are you humiliating me like this?"

"All right," Ding Minjun said, "if your heart is not in the Evil Sect, go ahead and poke out this monk's left eye."

Ji Xiaofu did not do as she was told. Instead, she said, "Ever since the E-mei School was founded by the Little Eastern Heretic, our Great-Grandteacher Guo, many of our school-mates have either chosen to be nuns or to remain unmarried all their lives. My reluctance to marry is nothing

extraordinary, so why must you push me into a corner?"

"Well, I am not taken in by your plea of innocence," Ding Minjun replied coldly. "If you do not stab him in the eye, I am going to spill the beans on your affairs."

"Elder Sister," said Xi Jiaofu in a gentle voice, "I hope that you will consider the bond of sisterhood that we share, and stop pushing me."

Ding Minjun laughed. "I am not asking you to do anything embarrassing," she said. "Our teacher instructed us to find out where the Golden-Maned Lion King is, and this monk here is the only lead that we have. But he was unwilling to reveal the truth and even harmed our companions. So it is only fair that I poke out his right eye, while you take out his left. Why are you still not doing it?"

Ji Xiaofu lowered her head and answered in quietly: "He showed us mercy earlier, so we should not turn around and drive him to his death. I am too soft-hearted to do this." She turned and put her sword back into its scabbard.

"You? Soft-hearted?" asked Ding Minjun with a sarcastic laugh. "Our teacher has often praised your ruthless swordplay techniques and tough character. In fact, she says that you take after her so much that she wants to pass her legacy on to you, so how can you be soft-hearted?"

It was then that the people around them finally understood the reason behind the two women's quarrel. Apparently, the leader of the E-mei School, Mie Jue, loved Ji Xiaofu so much that she had thoughts of making the young woman her heir. Jealous, Ding Minjun had eventually managed to obtain something that she could blackmail Ji Xiaofu with.

Zhang Wuji had been very grateful for the kindness that Ji Xiaofu had shown him, so he wished there and then that he could run out and give her spiteful sister a few tight slaps.

Then, Ding Minjun said, "Younger Sister Ji, let me ask you: When our teacher called all of us to the Golden Peak of Mount E-mei and taught us the 'Sword of Extermination' (Mie4 Jian4) and the 'Sword of Non-Compromise' (Jue2 Jian4) that she had developed, why did you not show up? Why did you cause our teacher to erupt with a massive fit of anger?"

"I was suddenly taken very ill in Ganzhou and could not move," answered Ji Xiaofu. "I have already reported this to our teacher, so why are you bringing it up now?"

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and replied, "You can keep the matter from our teacher, but you cannot keep it from me. I have something else to ask you, but if you poke this monk's eye out, I will keep my peace."

Ji Xiaofu lowered her head in silence as she mulled over her dilemma. Finally, she said, "Elder Sister, are you really not going to consider the bond that we share, growing up and learning martial arts in the same school?"

"Are you going to poke his eye out or not?" asked Ding Minjun in return.

"Do not worry, Elder Sister," said Ji Xiaofu. "Even if our teacher wants to pass her legacy to me, I will never dare to accept it."

"Right!" Ding Minjun retorted angrily. "So you are saying that I am jealous of you. How am I inferior to you, that you should make way for me? So ... are you going to poke his eye out or not?"

"Go ahead and punish me if I have done wrong," said Ji Xiaofu, "for I would never dare to resist. There are friends from other clans and organisations here, yet you are pushing me like this ... " Tears began to stream down her face.

Ding Minjun sneered and said, "Go ahead and act pitiful if you want to, because I know that you are cursing me in your heart. When you were in Ganzhou three or four years ago ... I cannot remember it too clearly, but you should be fully aware of the time it happened. Did you really have an illness? Well, I think you did 'have' something, but it was no illness. You had a baby!"

Ji Xiaofu turned and ran off at once, but Ding Minjun had already expected her to do so.

The older woman flew ahead, blocked her way with the sword and said, "I think that you had better poke Monk Peng's left eye out, or I will ask you who the baby's father is. I will also ask why a disciple of a renowned and upright clan like you would go and protect a crooked monk from the Evil Sect."

"Let ... let me go!" pleaded Ji Xiaofu in defeat.

But Ding Minjun did not relent. Placing the tip of her sword against the younger woman's chest, she asked loudly, "Where are you keeping the child? You are the fiancée of Wudang's Yin Liting, Yin the Sixth, so why did you have a child with someone else?"

These earth-shaking questions took everyone by surprise. Zhang Wuji was perplexed: This Auntie Ji is a good person, so how could she have done Uncle Yin wrong? He did not fully understand the affairs between men and women, of course, but even Chang Yuchun, Peng Yingyu, the long-bearded Taoist from Kunlun and the others were astonished by the

revelation.

Ji Xiaofu turned white and made a desperate dash for cover, but Ding Minjun stopped her with a deep and vicious slash on the right arm. Gritting her teeth against the pain, Ji Xiaofu pulled out her sword with her left hand and said, "Elder Sister, if you continue pushing me, I will have to let you down."

By then, Ding Minjun knew that the situation had reached the point of no return. She had exposed her sister's shameful secret, so the younger woman would definitely want to silence her. However, she was not as highly skilled in martial arts as Ji Xiaofu, so she had seized the first opportunity to injure her. Now that the woman herself had mentioned the use of force, Ding Minjun turned her sword in a move called 'The Moon Descends Upon the Western Mount' (Yue4 Luo4 Xi1 Shan1) and sent it into her sister's abdomen. Ji Xiaofu had no alternative but to respond the blade in her left hand.

The two sisters were well-versed in each other's swordplay techniques, so their closely-fought duel was marked with intense attacks and defences. Their wounded companions could neither stop them nor risk helping one at the expense of the other, so they found themselves staring in admiration at the women's skills: The E-mei School is indeed worthy of its position as one of the four largest learning centres of martial arts today, for its swordplay techniques are really as exquisite as they are reputed to be.

Ji Xiaofu's right arm bled more profusely as the duel wore on, so she became increasingly vicious in her strokes, hoping to drive Ding Minjun away and open up a route of escape for herself. However, she did not seem too successful in her efforts, for she was rather uncomfortable using the sword with her left hand. Furthermore, the massive loss of blood

had reduced her abilities by more than seven-tenths. On her part, Ding Minjun did not dare to go too close to Ji Xiaofu, preferring instead to keep her going and allow the eventual lack of blood to take its toll. Sure enough, the younger woman soon became so weak that her steps and strokes began to falter. Ding Minjun quickly seized the opportunity and stabbed Ji Xiaofu twice in the right shoulder, splattering her clothes with blood.

Suddenly, Peng Yingyu spoke up in a loud voice: "Ji-guniang, come over and gouge my left eye out. I am already very grateful for all that you have done." He knew that it was tremendously difficult for Ji Xiaofu to risk death in protecting an enemy. Furthermore, Ding Minjun had threatened her with the very thing that a woman treasured more than her own life -- the chastity of her name.

But it was already too late. Even if Ji Xiaofu really poked Peng Yingyu's eye out at that moment, Ding Minjun would still not allow her to leave. If she did not seize this opportunity to eliminate her younger sister-at-arms, she would have to face an endless stream of troublesome consequences in the future. As her strokes became more vicious, Peng Yingyu shouted, "Ding Minjun, you are absolutely shameless! It is no surprise that you are known as the Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun in the realm of the rivers and lakes, for your heart is indeed like the scorpion and the snake, and your looks are worse than Wuyan's."

Before the woman could take him to task for comparing her to the legendary Zhong Wuyan, who was known for the hideous disfiguration of her face, Peng Yingyu went on: "If every woman in the world is as ugly and as vomit-inducing as you are, all the men under the sun will want to become monks. With you, the Evil Wuyan, standing right in front of me all night, being a monk is not enough. I will have to be

totally blind as well!"

Although Ding Minjun was not a beauty, she was attractive in her own way. After all, she had a rather charming face that was very well taken care of. However, as a man who was very well-versed in the ways of the world, Peng Yingyu knew that every woman under the sun hated being told how ugly she was, regardless of whether it was the truth or not. Consequently, he had come up with the 'Evil Wuyan' nickname in a bid to draw Ding Minjun's attention to himself and allow Ji Xiaofu the opportunity to escape -- or at the very least, find a way to bandage her wounds.

Unfortunately, Ding Minjun had other thoughts: Once I kill Ji Xiaofu, the stinking monk will not be able to get away either. So, she ignored all his taunts.

"The Lady Warrior Ji is chaste as ice and pure as jade," Peng Yingyu added loudly. "Who does not know this fact? But that Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun insisted on proffering a love that was not reciprocated, dreaming of a relationship with Yin Liting of the Wudang School. When Yin Liting did not respond to your advances, you naturally thought of harming Lady Warrior Ji. Ha ha, your cheekbones are so high, your mouth is as big as a basin, your complexion is so yellow and your body is as thin as a length of bamboo. How can the handsome and easy-going Yin the Sixth be attracted to you? You did not even appraise yourself in the mirror, yet you went ahead and tried to catch his attention with all sorts of provocative glances ..."

Infuriated, Ding Minjun dashed over to Peng Yingyu and sent her sword towards his mouth.

To be honest, Ding Minjun's cheekbones were a little higher than usual and her mouth did not quite fit into the cherry-sized standard of that era. Her complexion was not as fair as she wanted it to be and her body was naturally slim. She was

often unhappy with these tiny blemishes, but they could only be spotted by others under close scrutiny. Yet, Peng Yingyu had been particularly observant to notice these flaws. So how could she remain composed after he announced her imperfections with added flavour and spice? Furthermore, she had never seen Yin Liting before, so when did she ever try to 'catch his attention with all sorts of provocative glances'?

Just as her sword was about to reach the monk, a man suddenly dashed out of the woods and got in front of Peng Yingyu. He was so fast that Ding Minjun could not pull her sword back on time. As the blade sank into the man's forehead, he swept a palm out and struck the woman on the chest. The force of the blow pushed Ding Minjun several steps back and caused her to throw up a mouthful of blood. By then, her sword had been stuck so firmly in the man's forehead that he was unlikely to live.

"Bai Guishou! Bai Guishou!" shouted the long-bearded Taoist from the Kunlun School. He scrambled excitedly to his feet and took a few wobbly steps before sinking back to the ground.

The man who had been killed was indeed the Leader of the Eagle Sect's Xuanwu Circle, Bai Guishou. After he had been seriously injured, he found out that Peng Yingyu had come under the combined attack of Shaolin, Kunlun, E-mei and Haisha in a bid to shield him. Consequently, he rushed to the scene and took the stab on behalf of his faithful and courageous friend. Known for his powerful palms, he had managed to strike Ding Minjun and break several of her ribs just before he died.

As Ji Xiaofu regained her composure, she tore a piece off from her clothing and bandaged the wound on her arm. Then, she

released the acupoints that had been blocked on Peng Yingyu's waist, before walking away in silence.

"Wait!" said the white-robed monk. "Ji-guniang, please accept a bow from Monk Peng." He bent over in gratitude, but Ji Xiaofu stepped aside, unwilling to receive his thanks.

Picking up the sword that the long-bearded Taoist had dropped on the ground, Peng Yingyu said, "This Ding Minjun uttered slanderous nonsense against your name, so she must not be allowed to live." As he sent the sword into the woman's throat, Ji Xiaofu deflected the blade with her sword.

"She is my older sister-at-arms," she said. "Although she has no affections for me, I cannot be unfaithful to her."

"The situation has reached the point of no return," said Peng Yingyu. "If she is not killed, she will cause you a lot of trouble in the days to come."

With tears streaming down her face, Ji Xiaofu replied, "I am the most unlucky and unfortunate woman under the sun, so I will have to accept my fate! Great Master Peng, do not harm my Elder Sister-at-Arms."

"Would I dare to dishonour the instruction of the Lady Warrior Ji?" the monk responded politely.

Then, Ji Xiaofu turned to Ding Minjun and said quietly, "Elder Sister, take care." Returning her sword to its scabbard, she walked out of the woods.

Peng Yingyu turned to the five injured men and said, "I have no grievances against any of you in the first place, so I really do not have to kill you. Unfortunately, you have heard the slander that this Ding woman spoke against the Lady Warrior

Ji. If word of this gets out into the realm of the rivers and lakes, how will the Lady Warrior Ji be able to face the public? Therefore, do not blame me for not allowing you to live, for the situation has left me with no alternatives." With that, he sent the sword forward five times, killing the two Taoists from the Kunlun School, the remaining monk from Shaolin and the two men from Haisha.

After that, he gave Ding Minjun a slash on the shoulder, scaring the woman out of her wits. Unable to fight back because of her injuries, she shouted, "Crooked baldy, do not torture me. Just stab me once and be done with it!"

Peng Yingyu laughed and said, "I do not dare to kill an ugly, yellow-skinned and wide-mouthed woman like you. If I did, you will go to Hell and give the evil ghosts there such a terrible fright that they will all escape into the world of men. You will also scare the King and Judge of Hades so badly that he will erupt in vomit and diarrhoea. Would that not be horrible?" He laughed three times and threw the sword on the ground. Then, he hugged Bai Guishou's body and wailed loudly before walking away.

Ding Minjun sat and breathed deeply for a long time. Then, she put her sword back into its scabbard and hobbled slowly out of the woods.

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Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji huddled in silence, seeing and hearing every single thing that transpired during the battle that had taken place so unexpectedly in the night. When Ding Minjun left, they finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Zhang Wuji spoke first: "Brother Chang, Auntie Ji is my Sixth Uncle Yin's fiancée. That Ding woman said that she ... she

had a baby with someone else. What do you think? Is it true or false?"

"She is spouting nonsense," answered Chang Yuchun. "Do not believe her."

"Right," said the boy in agreement. "When I see Sixth Uncle Yin, I will tell him about it and ask him to teach this Ding Minjun a good lesson. This will also help Auntie Ji to vent her anger."

"No, no!" said his companion at once. "Never ever mention this matter to your Sixth Uncle Yin. Do you understand? Once you mention it, things will become worse."

"Why?" asked the boy, totally puzzled by this unexpected word of caution.

"These statements are very unpleasant," answered the man, "so you do not need to repeat them to anyone else."

Zhang Wuji mumbled an "Mm!" in acknowledgement. After a while, he said, "Brother Chang, are you concerned that the matter is true?"

Chang Yuchun sighed and replied, "I really do not know."

At first light the next day, Chang Yuchun stood up, placed Zhang Wuji on his back and strode off once more. His strength had returned after the night's rest, so his movements were more nimble than the day before. After several li (1 li = 500 metres), they rounded a bend and came upon a main road.

Chang Yuchun was surprised: Uncle Hu lives in isolation in Butterfly Valley. The place is very remote, so why is there a

main road here? Did I take a wrong turn?

Just as he was about to look for a villager and ask for directions, hoofbeats sounded. Four Mongolian soldiers appeared on horseback, waving their sabres and shouting: "Walk quickly, walk quickly!" They rode right up to Chang Yuchun, waved their sabres menacingly and rode off again.

I have finally fallen into the mouth of the tiger again, the man thought, only to drag Brother Zhang along as well.

His injuries had left him without any ability to fight. He could not even defeat an ordinary Yuan soldier, so he had no alternative except to trudge forward. Soon, he noticed that many other people had appeared along the road, driven by the soldiers as if they were beasts. A glimmer of hope appeared in Chang Yuchun's heart: These barbarians seem to be oppressing the common people, so they may not necessarily be looking for me.

He walked along with the crowd until they arrived at a fork in the road, where a Mongolian army officer waited on horseback. There were sixty to seventy soldiers with him, each brandishing a huge sabre in his hand. The common people bowed at the officer as they passed by, while a Han-Chinese man demanded their surnames. A number of the people were let off with a kick or a slap each after they reported their surnames. When one man said that his surname was Zhang, a Yuan soldier seized him at once. Another man had a newly-bought vegetable knife in his basket, so he was stopped too.

Realising that something fishy was going on, Zhang Wuji whispered into his companion's ear: "Brother Chang, you had better fake a fall, roll into the long grass and leave your sabre there."

Chang Yuchun understood his purpose immediately, so he bent his knees, stumbled into the grass and discarded his sabre. Then, moaning and groaning in pain, he hobbled towards the army officer.

"Ruffian! Do you not know the rules?" the Han-Chinese man scolded. "Bow before the officer quickly!"

Recalling the horrible deaths that his former master, Zhou Ziwan, and his entire family had suffered under the sabres of the barbaric Mongolians, Chang Yuchun refused to do as he was told. His stubbornness caught the eye of the soldiers and one of them kicked him in the knee. The rebel lost his balance and sank to the ground.

"What is your surname?" asked the Han-Chinese man loudly.

Before Chang Yuchun could answer, Zhang Wuji said, "Our surname is Xie. He is my older brother."

The Yuan soldier gave the man a kick in the buttocks and said, "Get lost!"

As Chang Yuchun scrambled to his feet in anger, he swore a silent oath: If I do not chase these barbarians back to the northern deserts in my lifetime, I, Chang Yuchun, am not a man! Placing Zhang Wuji on his back once more, he headed north. But he had only gone a few steps when blood-curdling cries filled the air. Turning around, the two of them saw that the people whom the Yuan soldiers had seized earlier were dead, their heads separated from their bodies.

It turned out that the ruling government had been so brutal in its administration of the land that many rebels had risen among the common people. Consequently, the Mongolian ministers came up with the idea of having all the Han-

Chinese killed. It was an impossible dream, of course, so the Chief Advisor, Ba Yan, eventually issued a cruel order to have all the Han-Chinese with the surnames of Zhang, Wang, Liu, Li and Zhao killed. The Zhangs, Wangs, Lius and Lis were the most numerous among the Han-Chinese, while the Zhaos were seen as the descendants of the imperial family of the Song Dynasty. If people with these five surnames were wiped out, the power of the Han-Chinese would be greatly reduced. As time went by, the number of people with these five surnames who declared their loyalty to the Yuan Dynasty and became its officers increased. Eventually, someone among the Mongolian ministers advised the emperor to withdraw the order of slaughter. By then, the victims of this horrible decree were already beyond count.

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Chang Yuchun increased the pace of his walk and headed into the wilderness. He knew that Hu Qingniu's home was nearby, so he began looking out for it. By and by, the man and boy came upon vast stretches of red and purple flowers that filled the hills with a wonderful fragrance. Unfortunately, the earlier incident with the Mongolian soldiers was still so fresh in their minds that the beautiful scenery was entirely lost to them. After several turns and bends, they found themselves at the foot of a sheer cliff. They had reached a dead end.

Stumped, they soon noticed several butterflies flitting through a gap in the flowering shrubs. An idea popped into Zhang Wuji's head. "Since the place is called Butterfly Valley," he said, "perhaps we should just follow those butterflies and see where they lead us."

Chang Yuchun agreed.

Squeezing through the bushes, they found a tiny path. As they proceeded down the path, more butterflies appeared. These butterflies came in a variety of patterns and colours, including white, black and purple, but none of them seemed afraid of human beings. Dancing through the air, they even landed on Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji's heads, shoulders and hands. The two companions were comforted that they had entered Butterfly Valley at last.

"Please let me walk on my own!" said Zhang Wuji.

Chang Yuchun agreed and lowered him to the ground.

A little past noon, they came upon seven or eight huts on the bank of a clear stream. Flowers and plants grew in profusion around these huts. "We have arrived," Chang Yuchun declared. "These are the gardens where Uncle Hu grows his herbs and medicinal shrubs."

Walking over to the huts, he said in a loud but respectful voice: "Disciple Chang Yuchun greets Elder Uncle Hu."

A page emerged from one of the huts and said, "Please come in."

Chang Yuchun took Zhang Wuji's hand and followed the page indoors. A dignified-looking middle-aged man stood on one side of the hall, watching over another page who was fanning the flames under a boiling pot. The entire place smelt of medicine.

Chang Yuchun knelt before the man, bowed and said, "How do you do, Uncle Hu."

He must be the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley, Hu Qingniu, thought Zhang Wuji, so he clasped his fists in salute and

said, "Mr Hu."

Nodding at Chang Yuchun, Hu Qingniu replied, "I have heard about Zhou Ziwang. That is destiny, because the time of the barbarians is not over yet, and the day of our Sect's rise has not arrived." He reached for Chang Yuchun's wrist and felt his pulse. Then, he opened the man's shirt, took one look and said, "You have been struck by the foreign monks' Heart-Splitting Palm Technique. It is not really a big deal, but you used too much strength after being hit, so your heart is now seriously affected by a cold and deadly toxin. It will take quite a while to heal you of this." After that, he pointed to Zhang Wuji and asked, "Who is this child?"

"Uncle, his name is Zhang Wuji," answered Chang Yuchun. "He is the son of Wudang's Zhang the Fifth."

Hu Qingniu was taken aback. "He is from Wudang?" he asked angrily. "Why did you bring him here?"

Chang Yuchun quickly explained how he had been tasked to escort Zhou Ziwang's son to safety, and how Zhang Sanfeng had rescued him after he had been caught by Mongolian soldiers. "My life was saved by his grandteacher," the man went on, "so please make an exception and help this boy."

"Well, you were very generous to make such an offer," said Hu Qingniu sarcastically. "Hmmp! Zhang Sanfeng rescued you, not me. When have you ever seen me making an exception?"

Chang Yuchun fell on his knees and bowed several times. "Uncle, this brother's father would rather commit suicide than to betray a friend," he said. "He was a good man."

"A good man?" said Hu Qingniu with a cold laugh. "How

many good men are there under the sun? Can I heal them all? It would have been fine if he is not a member of the Wudang School. Why should someone from a renowned and upright organisation seek assistance from a heretic outsider like me?"

Nevertheless, Chang Yuchun persisted: "Brother Zhang's mother is the daughter of the White-Browed Eagle King, Sect-Leader Yin, so half of him can be considered a member of our Sect."

Feeling somewhat moved, Hu Qingniu nodded and said, "All right, get up. Being the maternal grandson of the Eagle Sect's White-Browed Yin does make things different." Walking over to Zhang Wuji, the physician explained in a warm and pleasant voice: "Child, I have always had the rule of not providing treatment to any member of the renowned and upright clans. Your mother is a member of our Sect, so I will not be breaking this rule if I treat you. Your maternal grandfather, the White-Browed Eagle King, was originally one of the Four Protector Kings of the Ming Sect. Due to some disagreements with the other brothers, he founded the Eagle Sect. However, he is not a traitor, for the Eagle Sect is considered a branch of the Ming Sect. You must promise me that you will join your maternal grandfather's organisation when you have recovered from your injuries, for you must no longer be a Wudang disciple."

Before Zhang Wuji could say anything, Chang Yuchun remarked, "No, Uncle. Mr Zhang Sanfeng has said that you cannot force the boy into our Sect. Furthermore, if he is indeed cured, his Wudang School will also not appreciate our kindness."

"Hmmp! What is so great about Zhang Sanfeng?" Hu Qingniu roared in anger. "He despises us, so why must I work

for him? Child, what decision have you made?"

Zhang Wuji knew that the toxins in his body had entered all his internal organs and there was nothing his grandteacher could do about it despite the richness of his internal strength. His life now depended entirely on the willingness of this eccentric physician to treat him, but his grandteacher had warned him against joining the Evil Sect and placing himself in an inextricable web for the rest of his life. Although he did not understand how bad the Evil Sect was and why his grandteacher and uncles hated it to the core, he believed with all his heart that the grandteacher whom he respected greatly could not be wrong.

Therefore, he thought: I would rather die from his unwillingness to treat me, than to violate Grandteacher's instructions. So, he raised his voice and said, "Mr Hu, my mother was a Hall-Master in the Eagle Sect, so I think that there must be something good about the organisation. But I have promised my grandteacher not to enter the Evil Sect, so how can I go back on my word? I cannot help it if you refuse to treat me. If I were to cling on to life for fear of death and agree to your condition, the world would gain nothing but another untrustworthy and unfaithful man. What good would there be in that?"

So the little monster wants to talk and act like a great hero! Hu Qingniu sneered in his heart. I will just go ahead and refuse him, and watch him beg on his knees. Turning to Chang Yuchun, he said, "Since he is unwilling to enter our Sect, Yuchun, ask him to leave. How can there be people who die of illness within the doors of Hu Qingniu's abode?"

Chang Yuchun knew that this older uncle-at-arms of his was particularly stubborn, so there was no purpose in begging him for something that he had clearly refused. So, he turned

to Zhang Wuji and said, "Little Brother, although the members of the Ming Sect and the upright clans do not see eye-to-eye on many matters, our Sect has produced many heroes and outstanding men since the Tang Dynasty. Furthermore, your maternal grandfather and mother are the Leader and Hall-Master of the Eagle Sect respectively. Do agree to Uncle Hu's condition, and I will bear full responsibility for it before Mr Zhang."

Zhang Wuji stood up and replied, "Brother Chang, you have done your best, so my grandteacher will not blame you for anything." Then, he headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Chang Yuchun in surprise.

"If I die in Butterfly Valley, would the reputation of the 'Healing Sage' not be damaged?" the boy said in return.

Hu Qingniu laughed coldly and said, "The One who Ignores the Dying is renowned all over the world. Those who fall dead outside the 'cow-sheds' of Butterfly Valley are not limited to this child alone."

Turning a deaf ear to his uncle's words, Chang Yuchun dashed out, grabbed Zhang Wuji and brought him indoors again.

"Uncle Hu, are you absolutely unwilling to rescue him?" asked Chang Yuchun as he gasped for breath.

"You know that I am also called 'The One who Ignores the Dying'," said Hu Qingniu, "so why do you ask?"

"But you are willing to treat my injuries?" asked the man again. "That is right," answered his uncle.

"All right then!" said Chang Yuchun. "I have promised Mr Zhang to have this brother treated, so I cannot allow the upright clans to say that the members of the Ming Sect are untrustworthy. I do not want you to cure my injuries any longer. Please treat this brother instead. If we make this one-for-one exchange, you will lose nothing."

Hu Qingniu looked him in the eye and said in a serious voice: "You have been grievously wounded by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique. If I start your treatment at this very moment, you will recover completely. A delay of seven days will save your life, but not your martial arts abilities, while a delay of fourteen days will render your injuries totally incurable."

"This is the work of my uncle, the one who ignores the dying," said Chang Yuchun. "I will depart with no resentments."

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji shouted, "I do not want you to save me! I do not want you to save me!" Then, he turned to Chang Yuchun and added, "Brother Chang, do you think that Zhang Wuji is an unscrupulous scoundrel? You offer your life in exchange for mine, but a life gained in this manner is terribly meaningless to me."

Chang Yuchun did not argue further with him. Undoing his belt, he grabbed Zhang Wuji and tied him tightly to a chair. "If you do not release me, I will start cursing people!" the boy shouted. When Chang Yuchun ignored him, he hardened his heart and yelled: "The One who Ignores the Dying, Hu Qingniu, is really as stupid as a cow! He cannot be compared even to a beast!"

Surprisingly, the physician, whose name Qingniu meant Black Cow, was not angered. He just stared coldly at the upset boy.

"Uncle Hu, Brother Zhang, I take my leave," said Chang Yuchun. "I am going to look for another physician!"

"There are no able physicians in this province of Anhui," said Hu Qingniu coldly. "But you are unlikely to cross the borders Anhui within seven days anyway."

Laughing loudly, Chang Yuchun replied, "I have an uncle who ignores the dying, so it is only fair that you have a nephew who should suffer death!" Then, he strode out of the door.

"When did I agree to your one-for-one exchange?" asked Hu Qingniu in a loud voice. "I am not treating both of you!" He picked up a broken piece of pilose antler (lu4 rong2) from the table and threw it at an acupoint on Chang Yuchun's knee, causing him to crumple into a heap on the ground.

Then, Hu Qingniu untied Zhang Wuji, gripped both his wrists tightly and proceeded to throw him out of the door, so that the two hapless patients could live and perish together in due course.

"What are you doing?" Zhang Wuji shouted in fright. Just then, the toxins in his body rushed to his brain and knocked him out.

End of Chapter 11.

[1] Chang YuChun is an actual person in Chinese history. He is one of the top generals that helped brought Zhu YuanZhang(first emperor of the Ming dynasty) to power. Rumor has it that Zhu YuanZhang whacked him soon after becoming emperor. But 'officially', Chang YuChun died of natural causes.

[2] The character 'Ming' means bright, or illuminate.

Chapter 12 - Needles and Prescriptions for Diseases Beyond Cure

(Translated by Huang Yushi*)

*Courtesy of Wuxiapedia.com



Zhang Wuji was so unschooled in the practice of acupuncture that blood started spurting out of Chang Yuchun's Kai Yuan acupoint. Located in the abdomen, it was one of the vital points of the body. Thus, the sight of the gushing blood threw Zhang Wuji into a panic at once. Suddenly, someone laughed loudly behind him. The boy turned around and saw Hu Qingniu standing with his hands behind his back, watching his desperate attempts to stem the flow of the blood with a smirk on his face.

Holding Zhang Wuji's wrists, Hu Qingniu suddenly realised that the boy's pulse thumped in such an unusual manner that he could not help but pay closer attention to the strange and irregular beats. Could this child have been struck by the 'Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness' (Xuan² Ming² Shen² Zhang³)? he asked himself. But this technique has been lost for such a long time that there is no one left who knows how to use it. If it is not the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness, what is it? Yet, there is no technique that can produce a cold and deadly toxin as this. It is also very amazing that the child has not died, despite having been poisoned for a long time. Yes, that old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng must have used his rich internal strength to keep him alive. Now, with the toxins stuck in his internal organs, only the deities can save his life. He picked the boy up and put him back into the chair.

By and by, Zhang Wuji regained consciousness and saw Hu Qingniu seated opposite him, staring at the flames on the stove that he used to boil medicinal brews. On the other hand, Chang Yuchun was stretched out on the grass outside the door. Each occupied with his own thoughts, no one said anything to anyone else.

Having dedicated his entire life to the study of medicine and healing, Hu Qingniu could cure the most terrible of diseases

and ailments. As a result, he became known as the 'Sage of Healing', giving proof to the amazing extent of his skills and abilities. Yet, he had never seen the toxins that were created by the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness all his life, and a long-term survivor who had this deadly poison in his internal organs was even more unbelievable. Like the wine-lover who found an exquisite brew and the glutton who smelt the fragrance of meat, how could he pass up such an invaluable opportunity to display his prowess? After thinking for half a day, the eccentric physician, who had initially refused to treat Zhang Wuji, finally came up with a wonderful solution to his personal dilemma: First, I will cure him. Then, I will make him die.

However, it was easier said than done to have the toxins in the boy's internal organs expelled. After more than two shichen (four hours) of deep thought, Hu Qingniu finally took out twelve bronze slivers, gathered up his internal strength and began inserting the tiny pieces into twelve different acupoints on Zhang Wuji's body. These included the Zhong Ji (Zhong1 Ji2), Tian Tu (Tian1 Tu1) and Jian Jing (Jian1 Jing3) acupoints on his abdomen, neck and shoulder respectively. The Zhong Ji acupoint was located at the confluence of the three Yin Channels of the Foot (Zu2 San1 Yin1 Jing1) and the Channel of Ren (Ren4 Mai4), while the Tian Tu acupoint was located at the confluence of the Channels of Yinwei (Yin1 Wei1) and Ren. As for the Jian Jing acupoint, it was found at the confluence of the Hand Shaoyang Channel (Shou3 Shao4 Yang2 Jing1), the Foot Shaoyang Channel (Zu2 Shao4 Yang2 Jing1), the Foot Yangming Channel (Zu2 Yang2 Ming2 Jing1) and the Yangwei Channel (Yang2 Wei1 Mai4).

Consequently, the twelve bronze slivers served to block each one of the Twelve Regular Channels (Shi2 Er4 Jing1 Chang2 Mai4, or Zheng4 Jing1 Shi2 Er4 Mai4) and the Eight Extraordinary Channels (Qi2 Jing1 Ba1 Mai4) in the boy's

body. The five primary internal organs (a.k.a. Wu³ Zang⁴) -- the heart, lungs, spleen, liver and kidneys -- as well as the pericardium, were considered yin elements in traditional Chinese medical practice, while the six secondary organs (a.k.a. Liu⁴ Fu³) -- the stomach, large intestines, small intestines, gall bladder, urinary bladder and the Three Visceral Cavities (a.k.a. San³ Jiao¹) -- were considered yang elements. Together, these were known as the Twelve Regular Organs. The pulses of Ren, Du (Du¹), Chong (Chong¹), Dai (Dai⁴), Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao (Yin¹ Jiao¹) and Yangjiao (Yang² Jiao¹) were neither Yin nor Yang in their movements, so they were known as the Eight Extraordinary Pulses(1).

The blocking of these Daily Organs and Extraordinary Pulses had the effect of containing the toxins in Zhang Wuji's body in their various locations. Then, Hu Qingniu burnt dried moxa leaves on the Yun Men (Yun² Men²) and Zhongfu (Zhong¹ Fu³) acupoints on the boy's shoulder, as well as the Tian Fu (Tian¹ Fu³), Xia Bai (Xia² Bai²), Chi Ze (Chi³ Ze²), Kong Zui (Kong³ Zui⁴), Lie Que (Lie⁴ Que¹), Jing Qu (Jing¹ Qu²), Da Yuan (Da⁴ Yuan¹), Yu Ji (Yu² Ji⁴) and Shao Shang (Shao⁴ Shang¹) acupoints along the entire length of his arm. These eleven acupoints were collectively known as the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yin¹ Fei⁴ Jing¹), so the heat from the burning of the moxa leaves could remove some of the toxins there. For Zhang Wuji, the terrible discomfort caused this heat-based treatment was vastly different from the massive chills he suffered whenever he had a toxin attack. After the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung was done, the Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach (Zu² Yang² Ming² Wei⁴ Jing¹) and the Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium (Shou³ Jue² Yin¹ Xin¹ Bao¹ Jing¹) were next

Hu Qingniu did not care whether the treatment caused Zhang Wuji any pain, and his use of the moxa leaves soon left dark burnt patches of skin all over the boy's body. On his

part, Zhang Wuji refused to show a single sign of weakness: You want to make me yell in pain, but I am not even going to make the slightest fuss. Therefore, he smiled and talked as if nothing was wrong, engaging Hu Qingniu in an animated discussion of the various acupoints and their locations. Although he knew next to nothing about medical practice, his godfather, Xie Xun, had taught him the various methods of blocking and releasing acupoints as well as the techniques of repositioning them. As a result, he knew exactly where each acupoint was. Such knowledge paled in comparison with the immense understanding of the renowned physician, of course, but since it touched a little on the principles of medicine, it served to get Zhang Wuji into Hu Qingniu's good books. Consequently, both of them chatted endlessly as the physician went about burning more moxa leaves on the boy's skin.

Zhang Wuji did not understand almost everything that the physician told him, yet he wanted to show the man that "my Wudang School knows all these things as well". So, every now and then, he would throw in a fallacy and argue his point, while Hu Qingniu took time to explain the error in detail. By and by, the physician realised that "this little fellow is just spouting nonsense in total ignorance", so all his explanations had been a waste of time and effort. Fortunately, Hu Qingniu did not have any companions in this remote valley, except for the two pages who helped him to cook, clean and make medicinal brews. As a result, he found himself cherishing the rambling discussion on acupoints that his young patient had come up with.

By the time Hu Qingniu was finished with the moxibustion of all the acupoints that were related to the Twelve Regular Organs, it was already dusk. The pages served a dinner of rice and vegetables on the table before taking a tray of food out to Chang Yuchun, who was still sprawled on the grass.

That night, Chang Yuchun slept outside, and Zhang Wuji did not bother make a single request of Hu Qingniu to let his hapless nephew in. Instead, he went out at bedtime and lay down to sleep beside Chang Yuchun in a silent indication of his willingness to share in the man's troubles. Hu Qingniu pretended not to see the goings-on, yet he could not help but be amazed by the boy's actions: This little fellow is indeed different from other children.

Early the next morning, Hu Qingniu started the moxibustion treatment on Zhang Wuji's Eight Extraordinary Channels, taking almost half the day before he was done. These stagnant pulses did not have the benefit of the free-flowing arteries and veins that coursed through Twelve Regular Organs, so it was a lot more difficult to expel the toxins that had found their way there. After that, Hu Qingniu prepared a prescription that used the reverse method of combatting the cold with something even colder. Consequently, Zhang Wuji shook and shivered for half a day after consuming the brew, before emerging with a marked improvement in his health.

Then, Hu Qingniu spent the later part of the day treating Zhang Wuji with acupuncture. The boy tried to provoke the physician into treating Chang Yuchun as well, but Hu Qingniu did not react much to his words, except to say, "My nickname, the 'Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley', is not entirely correct, for how can I call myself a 'Sage' in vain? I like it better if people refer to me as 'The One who Ignores the Dying'."

At that time, he happened to be pushing a needle into the Wu Shu (Wu3 Shu1) acupoint between Zhang Wuji's waist and thigh. This acupoint was located in the confluence of the Foot Shaoyang Channel and the Dai Channel, about one-and-a-half cun (5 cm) beside the urinary tract.

"The Dai Channel must be one of the strangest things in a person's body," said Zhang Wuji. "Mr Hu, do you know that there are people who do not have the Dai?"

"Rubbish!" answered Hu Qingniu. "How can a person not have the Dai?"

The boy was spouting nonsense, of course, but he went on, "There are many people under the sun, so any oddity is possible. Besides, I do not see much purpose in the existence of the Dai."

"Well, it is true that the Dai is more special than the other channels of the body," said Hu Qingniu, "but how can you say that it has no purpose? Mediocre physicians who do not understand its functions often prescribe the wrong treatments and medicines for it. I have written a book called 'A Discussion of the Dai Channel' (Dai⁴ Mai⁴ Lun⁴). Read it and you will understand why it exists." He disappeared into an inner room and emerged a moment later with a thin handwritten book with yellowing pages, which he passed to his young patient.

Zhang Wuji opened the first page and read: "The channels of the Twelve Regular Organs and the Eight Extraordinary Pulses run through the entire body, but the Dai Channel circulates only in the abdomen ... " The book went on to comment on the errors that physicians had made since ancient times: In 'The Functions of the Fourteen Channels' (Shi² Si⁴ Jing¹ Fa¹ Hui¹), the Dai was said to contain four acupoints, but in 'Successful Acupuncture' (Zhen¹ Jiu³ Da⁴ Cheng²), the Dai was described as having six acupoints. However, none were correct, for its acupoints numbered ten altogether. Two of these were so well-hidden that they were usually missed out.

Zhang Wuji did not understand many of the things he read in the book, but he realised that its contents and views were extraordinary. Consequently, he took the opportunity to discuss some of the errors that the ancient physicians had made.

Hu Qingniu was so pleased that he responded to all the boy's questions and remarks until he had finished inserting gold needles into each of the ten acupoints of the Dai Channel. After telling Zhang Wuji to take a rest, he added, "I have another book, 'The Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians(2)' (Zi3 Wu3 Zhen1 Jiu3 Jing1), which records all the painstaking research that I have done through the years." He went into the inner room again and came out with a hand-written tome so thick that it had to be separated into twelve smaller books.

All these years of living in isolation in the remote valley had turned Hu Qingniu in a very lonely man. Although he had a constant stream of patients, they were only interested in speaking praise for his unparalleled abilities as the healer of a million ailments. Unfortunately, he had already grown tired of hearing these words more than twenty years ago. As a physician, Hu Qingniu prided himself not in the exquisiteness of his abilities, but in the massive body of research, discoveries and techniques that he had accumulated in his lifetime. He knew that he had an extraordinary accomplishment in his hands, yet there was no one to share it with, except himself, the lonely inhabitant of a desolate valley. Therefore, when Zhang Wuji showed pleasure in reading the books that he had authored, Hu Qingniu felt as if he had found a friend who could understand his heart. Thus, he was more than happy to share his best work with this young patient who had no inkling what medicine and its practices were.

When Zhang Wuji opened the books, he found that each page was filled with characters as tiny as the head of a fly, detailing the acupoints, herbal prescriptions and methods of acupuncture for a mind-boggling array of diseases and ailments. A sudden thought entered his head: If I read on, perhaps I will find a way to heal Brother Chang's injuries. He picked up the ninth book, which was labelled 'The Pugilistic Arts', turned to the section on 'Treating Injuries Caused by Palm Techniques', and began his search. There were the Red-Sand Palm Technique (Hong² Sha¹ Zhang³), the Iron-Sand Palm Technique (Tie³ Sha¹ Zhang³), the Poison-Sand Palm Technique (Du² Sha¹ Zhang³), the Silken Palm Technique (Mian² Zhang³), the Mountain-Opening Palm Technique (Kai¹ Shan¹ Zhang³), the Tablet-Breaking Palm Technique (Po⁴ Bei¹ Zhang³) ... all sorts of palm-strike injuries were listed, together with detailed descriptions of their symptoms and treatments. After reading through 180 different varieties, the words 'Heart-Splitting Palm Technique' (Jie² Xin¹ Zhang³) popped up.

Overjoyed, Zhang Wuji studied the description under it carefully, only to find that there were more details about the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique itself than the method of treating the injuries that it caused. In fact, this was all there was: "Deal with the four acupoints of Zi Gong (Zi³ Gong¹), Zhong Ting (Zhong¹ Ting²), Guan Yuan (Guan¹ Yuan²) and Tian Chi (Tian¹ Chi²), and ignite a change in Yin, Yang and the Five Elements. Prescribe medication for the patient's joy, anger, worry, thought and fear, according to the five conditions of cold, hot, dry, wet and wind."

Traditional Chinese medical practice was not bound by a set of rigid rules, for treatments varied according to the condition of the patient. Therefore, the physician had to consider a list of criteria during treatment, including climate

(cold or hot), time (day or night), condition and location of the injury or illness (exposed, covered, internal or external), bodily functions (too much or too little), progress (beginning, middle or end), level of activity, gender, age ... Therefore, the difference between an able physician and a mediocre one was as great as the clouds and the mud. Zhang Wuji did not know all these, of course, but he read the treatment for the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique a few more times and committed it to memory. The last page of the section on 'Treating Injuries Caused by Palm Techniques' described the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness. Under the subtitle of 'Treatments', there was only one word: "None."

Zhang Wuji closed the book and put it carefully down on the table. "Mr Hu," he said, "this 'Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians' is so profound that I cannot understand much of what I have read. May I ask please: What does 'ignite a change in Yin, Yang and the Five Elements' mean?"

Hu Qingniu began his explanation, only to turn around in sudden realisation and say, "Are you asking me how Chang Yuchun's injuries can be healed? Ha-ha, I will talk about anything, except this."

Left with no alternatives, Zhang Wuji could only turn to the various medical books for answers. Fortunately, Hu Qingniu allowed him to read all the books he wanted. As a result, the boy became so engrossed in his search that he forgot to sleep and eat, reading not only the ten books that the physician had authored, but also other medical works such as 'The Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor' (Huang² Di⁴ Nei⁴ Jing¹), 'Hua Tuo's Diagrams of the Internal Systems' (Hua² Tuo² Nei⁴ Zhao¹ Tu²), 'Wang Shuhe's Manual of Arteries and Veins' (Wang² Shu¹ He² Mai⁴ Jing¹), 'Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions' (Sun¹ Si¹ Miao³ Qian¹ Jin¹

Fang1), 'The Thousand-Gold Book of Medical Assistance' (Qian1 Jin1 Yi4) and 'Wang Tao's Secrets to External Treatments' (Wang2 Tao1 Wai4 Tai2 Mi4 Yao4). Whenever he came across passages that seemed to relate to the description of Chang Yuchun's treatment, he took time to study them carefully. Meanwhile, Hu Qingniu continued his treatment, using acupuncture and moxibustion twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, to remove the toxins in his body.

Several days passed by in this manner. Although Zhang Wuji had gone through many books and memorised numerous principles and prescriptions, he was too young and ill-educated to fully understand everything that he had read.

Then, the sixth day of his arrival in Butterfly Valley dawned. Hu Qingniu had told them that Chang Yuchun's injuries had to be treated within seven days, or he would lose all his martial arts abilities even if his life was saved. The man had been sprawled on the grass for six days and six nights ... and it suddenly started to rain. Yet, Hu Qingniu was as cold as ever, turning a blind eye to Chang Yuchun and the muddy puddle that had begun to take shape around him. Zhang Wuji became very angry, thinking: All the medical books that I have read, except those that you have written yourself, state that the physician must have a benevolent heart that seeks to bring benefit to mankind. What is the use of having all these skills when you ignore the dying? What sort of 'able physician' are you?

That night, the rain fell even heavier. As lightning flashed and thunder roared, Zhang Wuji gritted his teeth in determination and thought: I will have to give it a shot, even if it ends up making Brother Chang's injuries worse. He took eight gold needles from Hu Qingniu's cupboard, walked over to Chang Yuchun and said, "Brother Chang, I spent the past

few days reading as many of Mr Hu's medical books as I could. Although I do not understand everything, your treatment can no longer be delayed. Therefore, I am going to take a dangerous risk and try some acupuncture on you. If an unfortunate mishap occurs, I will not carry on living myself."

Chang Yuchun laughed and replied, "What are you talking about? Hurry up and poke me with the needles. If I survive, we can seize the opportunity to embarrass my Uncle Hu. If I die because of two or three needles, it would still be much better than suffering in this muddy puddle!"

Zhang Wuji's hands shook as he touched the Kai Yuan (Kai1 Yuan2) acupoint on Chang Yuchun's body and proceeded to push a thin gold needle into it. He had never practised acupuncture before, so he just copied what he had seen Hu Qingniu do in the past few days. Unfortunately, the physician's needles were so fine and pliable that they could not be used by anyone without a substantial level of internal strength. Unaware of this, Zhang Wuji exerted external strength on the needle, causing it bend without entering Chang Yuchun's flesh. The boy had no choice but to pull it out and try again. Acupuncture done right would never draw blood, but Zhang Wuji was so unschooled in its practice that blood started spurting out of Chang Yuchun's Kai Yuan acupoint. Located in the abdomen, it was one of the vital points of the body. Thus, the sight of the gushing blood threw Zhang Wuji into a panic at once.

Suddenly, someone laughed loudly behind him. The boy turned around and saw Hu Qingniu standing with his hands behind his back, watching his desperate attempts to stem the flow of the blood with a smirk on his face. Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, Brother Chang's Kai Yuan acupoint is bleeding profusely. What should I do?"

"I know exactly what must be done," answered Hu Qingniu, "but why should I tell you?"

Lost of ideas, the boy replied, "We will make a one-for-one exchange right now. Please rescue Brother Chang quickly, and I will die before you in his place."

"I have said before that I will not treat him," said Hu Qingniu coldly, "so, I will not! I am only a man who ignores the dying, not the Ghost of Non-Permanence (Wu² Chang² Gui³) that drags people to their doom, so what benefit does your death give me? I will not rescue one Chang Yuchun even if ten Zhang Wuji die in his place."

Knowing that it was just a waste of precious time to argue with the stubborn physician, Zhang Wuji began looking for a solution. The gold needles were too soft for his use, but there were no other types of needles available. After a moment's thought, he broke a length of bamboo and used a small knife to whittle it down into several toothpick-like slivers. Then, he inserted the slivers into Chang Yuchun's Zi Gong, Zhong Ting, Guan Yuan and Tian Chi acupoints. Although these bamboo slivers were a lot stiffer than the gold needles, they were still pliable enough not to draw blood upon entry to the various acupoints. Moments later, Chang Yuchun threw up several large mouthfuls of dark-coloured blood.

Zhang Wuji did not know whether Chang Yuchun's reaction was caused by a worsening of his injuries, or the success of his bamboo "needles" in expelling the clots that had formed in the man's blood. Turning around, the boy found that Hu Qingniu still regarded him with disdain, but a hint of approval had also appeared on his scornful face. Finally assured that his treatment had not been wrong, he rushed indoors, looked up some medical books and wrote up a prescription for his patient. Although he had learnt from the

books that certain herbs could cure certain ailments, he did not have any idea what the dried rhizome of *Rehmannia* (sheng1 di4), the root of the Chinese *Thorowax* (chai2 hu2), *Achyranthes* root (niu2 xi1) and the gall of bear (xiong2 dan3) were. Yet, he turned to one of the pages and said as confidently as he could, "Please decoct a portion of medicinal soup according to this prescription."

The page took the prescription, showed it to Hu Qingniu and asked if it was all right to go ahead. The physician sneered and said, "What a joke! What a joke! Go ahead and make the soup. If he does not die drinking it, there will no longer be any dead people on earth."

Zhang Wuji grabbed the prescription immediately and reduced the amount of each herb used by half. Then, the page began decocting the medicine, until a single bowl of soup was produced. Bringing the thick and pungent brew to Chang Yuchun's mouth, Zhang Wuji held back his tears and said, "Brother Chang, I really do not know whether this bowl of medicine will do you good or harm ... "

"Wonderful, wonderful!" said Chang Yuchun with a laugh. "This is what I call 'the sightless physician curing the blind horse'." Closing his eyes, he threw his head back and gulped down every single drop in the bowl.

That night, Chang Yuchun felt as if a million knives were slicing through his abdomen. He also kept throwing up mouthfuls of blood. Zhang Wuji stayed by his side all night, braving thunder, lightning and rain to look after his friend. When morning finally arrived, the rain stopped. Chang Yuchun's vomiting became less frequent and the volume of blood that he threw up decreased. The colour of blood also changed gradually from dark to purple to red.

"Little Brother, your medicine did not kill me at all," said Chang Yuchun in delight. "In fact, I think my injuries are beginning to get better."

"My prescription worked?" asked Zhang Wuji, hardly daring to believe his eyes and ears.

Chang Yuchun laughed and said, "My late father must have known that something like this would happen, so he named me 'Chang Yuchun' - Frequent, Meet, Spring - so that I will frequently meet with great masters like you, who will put a miraculous spring back in my dying steps. But I must say that your prescription was rather heavy-handed. My stomach felt as if it was being pierced by dozens of knives after drinking the brew."

"Yes, yes," Zhang Wuji responded. "I guess I overdid it a bit."

It turned out that the dosage was not just a bit more than usual. In fact, it was several times higher than what was normally required. Furthermore, no adjuvants were used to make the medicine more friendly on the stomach, so the thick brew had set about working its terribly strong cure as soon as it was ingested. Although Zhang Wuji had found the correct herbs for his friend's injuries from Hu Qingniu's books, he did not have a single clue about the 'Master-Servant-Assistant-Messenger' principle that guided the use of herbs. If Chang Yuchun's body had not been unusually strong, he would have died from the concoction.

When Hu Qingniu came out of his hut after waking up and washing his face, he was shocked to see Chang Yuchun glowing with renewed health. One of them is intelligent and brave, while the other is unusually strong in body and spirit, he said to himself. Consequently, the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique have been cured.

After this success, Zhang Wuji immediately prepared a prescription of ginseng (ren2 shen1), pilose antlers (lu4 rong2), the tuber of the multiflower knotweed (shou3 wu1) and poria (fu2 ling2) to strengthen Chang Yuchun's body and assist in his recovery. After ten days or so of consuming the top-quality herbs that Hu Qingniu kept in his home, Chang Yuchun made so much progress that he eventually said to Zhang Wuji, "Little Brother, my injuries have healed completely, so there is no more reason for you to accompany me day and night. We will part here."

The life and death experiences of the past month had turned the boy and the man into friends who were ready to die for each other. Therefore, Zhang Wuji was very reluctant to part with Chang Yuchun. However, he knew that the man could not stay by his side all his life, so he tearfully agreed.

"Do not feel bad, Little Brother," said Chang Yuchun. "I will come back and visit you in three months. If the poison in your body is gone by then, I will take you to Mount Wudang, so that you can see your grandteacher again."

Then, he went into the hut, bowed before Hu Qingniu and said, "My injuries have been healed. Although it was Brother Zhang who treated me, he was nevertheless guided by your medical books, Uncle Hu. I have also consumed quite a bit of the expensive herbs and medicines that you possess."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Hu Qingniu replied, "That is nothing. You may have recovered from your injuries, but you have also lost forty years of life."

"What?" asked Chang Yuchun, for he did not understand the physician's remarks.

"Well," answered Hu Qingniu, "according to the condition of your body and mind, you should live beyond eighty years old. However, that little fellow used some erroneous medical prescriptions and faulty acupuncture techniques on you. As a result, you will ache all over whenever it rains. At about forty years of age, you will finally go and see the King of Hades."

Chang Yuchun laughed heartily. "A man lives to serve his country," he declared. "If I can establish a work of such merit, thirty years of life will suffice. Why then do I need forty? One can live to a hundred years old, but if he does not accomplish anything, his life is but a waste of food."

Hu Qingniu nodded again, but he did not say anything more. According to The Legend of Chang Yuchun in the Historical Annals of the Ming Dynasty, the man did eventually die of a sudden illness at the age of forty.

Zhang Wuji walked Chang Yuchun all the way out to the entrance of Butterfly Valley before both of them parted in tears. Then, the boy made a silent decision in his heart: My bumbling cures and treatments caused Brother Chang to lose forty years of life. Although he had suffered harm in my hands, could he also not enjoy benefits from them? I must find a way to restore him to his previous state of health.

Since then, Hu Qingniu treated Zhang Wuji with acupuncture and herbal concoctions on a daily basis, seeking to reduce and expel the deadly toxins in his body. Meanwhile, the boy continued to study the physician's books and memorise the principles behind the use of medicines and herbs. Whenever he came across something that he could not understand, he would ask the physician for help. His desire to learn pleased Hu Qingniu so much that he would explain everything in great detail. Sometimes, the boy's questions were so strange that they caused the man to look at things in ways that he

had never thought of before. Hu Qingniu had originally planned to have Zhang Wuji killed after his injuries were healed, but he soon felt the young man's death would take away the only person whom he could really talk to in the valley. Therefore, he found himself wishing that his companion would not recover as quickly as he had initially wanted him to.

Several months passed. One day, Hu Qingniu suddenly discovered that nothing happened when the Guan Chong (Guan1 Chong1) acupoint on Zhang Wuji's ring-finger was pricked by a needle. The Qing Leng Yuan (Qing1 Leng3 Yuan1) acupoint two cun (6.66 centimetres) above his elbow and the Si Zhu Kong (Si1 Zhu2 Kong1) acupoint in the cavity of his brow did not respond to the needles either. These three points were part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities. Named Upper, Middle and Lower respectively, these cavities were described as an amazing part of the body's internal organs in medical books. Despite painstaking thought and a variety of marvellous techniques, Hu Qingniu could not expel any of the toxins that had found its way into the boy's Visceral Cavities. As a result, he became so stressed out by the entire episode that he had ten grey hairs in as many days.

Deeply grateful for his efforts, Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, you have already done your best. Everyone on earth must die someday, so this is just an indication that my time has come. You really do not have to ruin your own health for the sake of mine."

Hu Qingniu snorted in disdain and said, "You despise our Ming and Eagle Sects, so when have I made any efforts to save your life? But my failure to cure your illness will inevitably damage my reputation as the 'Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley'. Thus, I must ensure that you are healed

first. Then, I will have you killed."

A involuntary chill ran down the boy's spine, for he was aware that the physician would never overturn his own decision. "Since the toxins in my body are not dissipating, I will eventually die," he said. "So you need not lift a finger against me. Sigh, all the people under the sun seem to have only one wish -- that everyone else must die before they can be truly happy. Thus, they study the pugilistic arts just so that they could have everyone else killed."

To his surprise, Hu Qingniu kept silent. After gazing at the sky outside his door for a long time, he said in a quiet voice, "When I was young, I put all my heart into the study of medicine and aspired to bring hope and benefit to mankind, but I soon found out how wrong I had been when a man whom I had rescued turned around and hurt me badly. He was a young fellow who was poisoned by the venom of the golden silkworm in Guizhou's Miao Settlement. This particular venom was so potent that its victims were bound to suffer terribly painful deaths. After three sleepless days and nights of painstaking effort, I finally succeeded in curing him. Subsequently, we became sworn brothers, and I gave him the hand of my younger sister in marriage. But he eventually caused my sister's death. Do you know who he is? He is now the reputable leader of a renowned and upright clan!"

The pain and grief on Hu Qingniu's face began filling Zhang Wuji's heart with an unexpected compassion for him: So it was this tragic experience that turned him into a cold-hearted man who ignores the dying. "Who is this unfaithful ingrate with the heart of a wolf and the lungs of a dog?" he asked.

The physician gnashed his teeth in anger and answered, "He

... he is none other than the leader of the School of Mount Hua, Xianyu Tong."

"Why do you not take him to task over this matter?" asked Zhang Wuji again.

"I have looked him up thrice altogether," Hu Qingniu replied with a sigh, "but I came away defeated each time. In fact, I was almost killed in our last duel, for this man is very highly skilled in martial arts. He is also very intelligent and resourceful, so much so that he is known as 'The Shrewd Strategist' (Shen² Ji¹ Zi³). I am really not his match. Furthermore, as the leader of the School of Mount Hua, he has many subordinates at his beck and call. Our Ming Sect, on the other hand, has been torn apart by internal strife in recent years. All the top pugilists in our Sect have been battling one another, so there was no one who could help me then. Besides, I am too ashamed to beg others for assistance. I am afraid that this grievance will never be redressed. Sigh, my poor ill-fated sister ... our parents passed away when we were young, so both of us depended on each other ... " At this point, tears began welling up in his eyes.

He is actually not a cold, sour and heartless man, thought Zhang Wuji.

Suddenly, Hu Qingniu raised his voice and said, "You must never ever bring this matter up again. If so much as a single word leaks out, I will make you suffer between life and death for the rest of your days!"

The boy opened his mouth to retort, but before he could say anything, his heart softened. After all, the physician's tragic experiences were not beneath his own. "I will not say a thing," he agreed at last.

Hu Qingniu stroked the boy's hair, sighed and added, "Poor thing, poor thing!" Then, he turned and headed for the inner room.

After the unexpected failure to remove the toxins in the boy's Three Visceral Cavities and the long conversation about his past, Hu Qingniu's attitude towards Zhang Wuji changed. Although he made no further mention about his background and personal problems, the physician found himself developing a liking for his thoughtful young patient. He was indeed a good companion for the lonely inhabitant of the valley. Consequently, Hu Qingniu instructed Zhang Wuji daily on the Yin, the Yang and the Five Elements of medical practice as well as the methods and techniques of acupuncture, lessons which the boy devoured with all his heart. Armed with an amazing talent for medicine, Zhang Wuji made such laudable progress in the study of various books, including 'The Xiyao Manual of the Yellow Emperor' (Huang² Di⁴ Xia¹ Ma Jing¹), 'Xiyao's Book of Acupuncture' (Xi¹ Fang¹ Zi³ Ming² Tang² Jiu³ Jing¹), 'Beneficial Prescriptions for Great Safety' (Tai⁴ Ping² Sheng⁴ Hui⁴ Fang¹), 'The Book of Acupuncture: Volumes 1 and 2' (Jiu⁴ Jia³ Yi⁴ Jing¹) and 'Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions', that Hu Qingniu could not help but sigh and say, "With your intelligence and natural flair, and my knowledge and abilities as a teacher, you should be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the great physicians Hua Tuo and Bian Que before the age of twenty, but ... sigh, what a pity, what a pity."

He meant to say that the boy would be dead by the time he finished his studies in medicine, so what use was there in such a display of diligence and hard work? However, Zhang Wuji had a totally different purpose in his heart. He wanted to learn the best and the most effective medical techniques, so that he could help Chang Yuchun regain the health that he

had lost. In addition, he hoped that he would enable Yu Daiyan to walk without aid. These were the two greatest desires of his heart, so if he could accomplish them before his death, he would depart with no regrets.

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Life in the valley was peaceful and quiet, and the days and weeks passed with ease. When Zhang Wuji marked the second anniversary of his stay in Butterfly Valley, he was already fourteen years old. During these two years, Chang Yuchun visited him several times, with news about Zhang Sanfeng and the world outside. Apparently, the elderly Taoist was so happy to hear of the boy's progress that he instructed the boy to stay on in the valley until his recovery was complete. In addition, Zhang Sanfeng and his six disciples sent gifts of clothes and other necessities, but they could not visit the boy whom they missed dearly because of the difference in clan affiliations. Zhang Wuji missed his grandteacher and uncles too, and he almost rushed back to Mount Wudang to see them. As for the world outside the valley, the Mongolians' oppression of the Han-Chinese worsened by the day. The common people did not have enough to eat, and rising banditry gripped the land. At the same time, the feud between the upright clans and the Evil Sect worsened. Many people were injured and killed on both sides, deepening the vendettas between them.

Chang Yuchun stayed only for a few days during each visit, for he seemed to be very busy with the affairs of the Sect.

One night, after reading Wang Haogu's medical book entitled 'Matters that are Difficult to Ascertain' (Ci3 Shi4 Nan2 Zhi1), Zhang Wuji felt so tired that he went to bed without further thought. When he woke up the next day, his head hurt so badly that he thought he was coming down with a cold. As he

walked into the hall in search of some anti-cold medication, he noticed that the sun was shining from the west. Shocked that it was already past noon, he thought: I must be ill to sleep for such a long time. He quickly took his own pulse, but he found nothing irregular about it. Have I finally reached the end of my days? he asked himself.

Zhang Wuji went over to Hu Qingniu's room and found the door tightly shut. Coughing lightly to get the physician's attention, he heard the man say: "Wuji, I am not feeling well today. My throat hurts badly, so just continue reading on your own."

"Yes," the boy answered, before adding out of concern: "Sir, would you allow me to take a look at your throat, please?"

"That is not necessary," Hu Qingniu replied hoarsely. "I have looked at it with a mirror. It is nothing serious, so I have taken some powdered bezoar and rhinoceros horn (niu2 huang2 xi1 jiao3 san3)."

That evening, when one of the pages served Hu Qingniu dinner in his room, Zhang Wuji walked in and saw that the physician was lying in bed with a haggard-looking face.

"Get out quickly, all of you!" said Hu Qingniu with a wave of his hand. "Do you know what I have come down with? It is smallpox!"

Sure enough, there were little red dots all over his face and hands. Zhang Wuji knew that smallpox was a dangerous disease. A light attack would leave marks all over the face, but a serious one could very well cause death. Although Hu Qingniu was a very knowledgeable physician who could treat his own illnesses better than anyone else, Zhang Wuji found himself still feeling concerned about him.

"You must not enter my room again," Hu Qingniu went on. "All the bowls, chopsticks, cups and plates that I have used must be sterilised in boiling water. You and the pages must not mix these utensils with your own." After a moment's thought, he added, "Wuji, you had better leave Butterfly Valley and stay outside for half a month or so. I do not want to pass the smallpox on to you."

"No, that is not necessary," answered Zhang Wuji at once. "You are ill. If I go away now, who will take care of you? After all, I am a bit more knowledgeable about medicine than these two pages."

"I think that it is better for you to go away," said Hu Qingniu, but Zhang Wuji refused to be persuaded. Although the man had his idiosyncracies, a comfortable relationship had developed between the two of them in the past two years. Furthermore, it was unlike the boy's character to run away in the face of trouble. Therefore, Hu Qingniu finally relented and said, "All right. But you must not step into my room."

For the next three days, Zhang Wuji checked on Hu Qingniu once in the morning and once again in the evening. Although the physician sounded rather hoarse, he seemed to be quite alert. He also had a bigger appetite than usual, so his condition did not appear to be serious. In addition, Hu Qingniu made daily announcements of the herbs that he wanted to take, as well as their respective dosages. Then, the pages would set about decocting the various brews.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, Zhang Wuji sat down and began reading a chapter in 'The Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor', which was entitled 'A Great Discussion on the Management of the Four Forces' (Si⁴ Qi⁴ Tiao² Shen² Da⁴ Lun⁴). By and by, he came to a passage that said: "Since

ancient times, the sages have focused on the prevention rather than the healing of illnesses. They prefer to deal with troubles that have not erupted rather than problems that are already deep-set. Curing great illnesses that have done their damage and rectifying upheavals that have taken place are just like digging wells at the point of thirst and forging weapons at the point of battle -- already too late." Nodding in agreement, Zhang Wuji thought: These words are very true indeed, for it is really too late to dig a well when I am thirsty and forge a weapon just before I get into a fight. A chaotic country that experiences subsequent peace may have returned to its former stability, but its original power and strength would have suffered a massive depletion. Illnesses should also be treated before they break out, but Mr Hu's smallpox is an external ailment that cannot be treated before it occurs.

Then, he recalled a passage from a chapter in the same book that was known as 'A Great Discussion of the Responses of the Yin and the Yang' (Yin1 Yang2 Ying4 Xiang4 Da4 Lun4): "The physician begins by treating the skin, then the flesh, then the nerves, then the Six Secondary Organs and finally the Five Primary Organs. He who treats the Five Primary Organs is left with only half a chance for success." An able physician must begin treating an illness the moment its symptoms appear, said Zhang Wuji to himself. If he waits until the disease has eaten into the Five Primary Organs before taking action, his chances of success would have already fallen by half. As for people like me, whose internal systems are overrun by toxins, we are doomed nine times out of ten.

As he praised the wisdom of the ancient physicians and reminisced about life since his injuries, Zhang Wuji suddenly heard the sound of horses' hooves heading into the valley. A short while later, the riders came to a stop outside the huts.

A voice among them called out: "Friends from the martial arts circle seek an audience with the Sage of Healing, Mr Hu, requesting that he provides treatment for our ailments."

Stepping out for a look, Zhang Wuji saw a swarthy man standing in front of his hut. The man had the reins of three horses in one hand, two of which carried a blood-soaked man each. The swarthy man wore a huge bloody bandage on his head, while his right arm hung from his neck in a sling. All three of them appeared to be seriously wounded.

"You have come at a most unfortunate time," said Zhang Wuji. "Mr Hu is ill and bed-ridden, so he is unable to offer you his services. Please see another physician!"

"But we have ridden hundreds of li (1 li = 500 metres) with our lives hanging by a thread," said the swarthy man. "We can be saved only by the Sage of Healing."

"Mr Hu has been struck by a very serious case of smallpox," Zhang Wuji explained. "This is the truth, for I do not dare to deceive you."

"The three of us are gravely wounded," said the swarthy man again. "Unless we are treated by the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley himself, we are sure to die. Little Brother, please report to Mr Hu on our behalf and find out what his instructions are."

"In that case, may I enquire what your esteemed surnames and names are?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"Our worthless names deserve no mention," answered the swarthy man. "Please say that we are disciples School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua." His body shook and he threw up a large mouthful of blood.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He knew that Xianyu Tong from the School of Mount Hua was a great enemy of Hu Qingniu, so he went over to the physician's door and called, "Sir, there are three seriously-injured men outside who seek your services. They say that they are disciples of School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua."

Hu Qingniu gasped in surprise before replying angrily: "I will not treat them! Chase them away at once!"

"Yes," answered the boy. Then, he returned to the wounded men and said, "Mr Hu is too ill to see anyone. Please forgive us."

The swarthy man frowned and opened his mouth to plead for help, but before he could say anything, a thin and small-sized fellow, who had been slumped on one of the horses, lifted his head and threw something into the hut. A golden light flashed past Zhang Wuji before coming to a stop on the table. "Take this golden flower and show it to 'The One who Ignores the Dying'," said the thin man. "Tell him that we have been hurt by the owner of the golden flower. Now, this person is about to come and cause him trouble as well. If 'The One who Ignores the Dying' can cure our ailments, the three of us will stay behind and help him to fight the enemy. Our pugilistic skills are not great, but three additional helpers are better than none."

Zhang Wuji found the thin man rather rude, unlike the swarthy fellow who was more polite. Walking over to the table, he saw that the golden flower was actually a type of projectile. Made entirely from yellow gold, it was exactly the same size and shape as a real plum blossom. The handiwork was so exquisite that the bloom even had pistils that were fashioned from platinum. Zhang Wuji reached to pick it up,

only to discover that the thin man had thrown it with so much force that it had become embedded in the table. As he prised it out with a pair of tweezers, he thought: This skinny fellow seems rather skilled in martial arts, but he ended up being hurt so badly by the owner of the golden flower. I had better tell Mr Hu that this formidable person is coming to cause trouble. Holding the little flower in his hand, he stood outside the physician's room and repeated what the thin man had told him.

"Show me the weapon," said Hu Qingniu.

Pushing the door open and gently sweeping the door-curtain aside, Zhang Wuji found the physician's room as dark as night. He knew that smallpox sufferers were afraid of wind and light, so it was only expected that the windows were all sealed up. Hu Qingniu had a piece of black cloth wrapped around his face, revealing only a pair of eyes. Zhang Wuji was shocked: I wonder how the blisters are under that cloth. Would they leave scars on his face?

"Put the golden flower on the table and leave quickly," Hu Qingniu said.

Zhang Wuji did as he was told and stepped out of the room. But before he could close the door, Hu Qingniu spoke again: "The lives and deaths of the three have absolutely nothing to do with me. They also need not worry whether I am dead or alive." The golden flower flew across the room, sliced through the door-curtain and landed on the floor with a thud. In the past two years, Zhang Wuji had never seen the physician practise any martial arts. Yet, this cultured man had turned out to be a highly skilled pugilist as well. Although he was ill, he had lost none of his pugilistic abilities.

The boy picked up the golden flower, returned it to the thin

man, shook his head and said, "Mr Hu is really very ill ... "

Suddenly, the sounds of hooves and wheels were heard. A horse-drawn carriage rolled into the valley.

As the carriage came to a stop outside the row of huts, Zhang Wuji saw that it was driven by a sallow-looking young man. The man lifted a bald elderly fellow out of the carriage and asked, "Is the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley, Mr Hu, at home? The Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple (Sheng⁴ Shou³ Qie² Lan²) Jian Jie of the Kongdong School has come from afar to seek treatment ... " Before he could say more, he collapsed, dragging the bald elderly man to the ground with him. By a stroke of coincidence, the two horses that had drawn the carriage fell as well, foaming in their mouths.

The condition of these two newcomers and their horses was sufficient proof that they had travelled a long way without rest, just so that they could seek treatment from Hu Qingniu. The mention of the 'Kongdong School' rekindled Zhang Wuji's memories of his parents' suicides on Mount Wudang two years earlier. The elders of Kongdong were among those who had forced the couple to their deaths, and although this particular bald man had not been present that day, he was probably not a good fellow. Yet, before Zhang Wuji could refuse his request and send him away, four or five more people entered the valley. Some of them had crutches, while others leaned on one another for support. They all looked as if they were also wounded.

Knitting his brows into a frown, the boy did not wait for the latest group to approach him. Instead, he announced in a loud voice: "Mr Hu has contracted smallpox. He cannot even help himself at this moment, so he is unable to treat your ailments. Please seek another physician as soon as possible, so that your treatments are not delayed."

When the latest group finally reached the row of huts, Zhang Wuji saw that it consisted of five men. Looking as pale as paper, without any visible wounds on their bodies or patches of blood on their clothes, the men had probably suffered internal injuries. Their leader, a tall and fat fellow, nodded at the bald Jian Jie and the thin man who threw the golden flower. Then, the three of them exchanged a bitter laugh.

They know one another! thought Zhang Wuji in surprise. His curiosity aroused, he asked: "Did all of you fall victim to the owner of the golden flower as well?"

"That is correct," answered the fat man. Then, the swarthy man, who had been the first to arrive, added, "What is your name, Little Brother? How are you related to Mr Hu?"

"I am Mr Hu's patient," Zhang Wuji replied. "When Mr Hu says that he will not treat you, he really means it. Thus, there is no purpose for you to continue hanging around here."

As they spoke, four more people arrived. Some came in carriages, while others rode horses, but all of them requested an audience with Hu Qingniu.

Zhang Wuji became even more puzzled: The Butterfly Valley is so remote that besides the members of the Evil Sect, very few people in the realm of the rivers and lakes know about its location. These fellows come from Kongdong and Mount Hua, so they are definitely not related to the Sect. How did all of them end up being injured at the same time? And how did all of them find their way here with such coincidence? Then, another thought entered his mind: Since the owner of the golden flower is such a formidable pugilist, it would not have been difficult for him to take these people's lives. But why

did he just wound them grievously?

Some of the wounded visitors continued to plead for help, while others remained totally quiet, but all fourteen of them flatly refused to leave. As evening fell around them, they crowded into one of the huts for shelter. When one of the pages served Zhang Wuji his dinner, the boy went ahead and ate it without bothering about the visitors. Then, he lit an oil lamp and resumed his reading. Turning a blind eye to the fourteen, he said to himself: Since I am learning Mr Hu's methods and techniques of treatment, I may as well copy him and ignore the dying too.

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Quiet settled on Butterfly Valley. Except for the occasional sound of Zhang Wuji turning a page of his book and the heavy breathing of the wounded visitors, no other noises were heard. Suddenly, light footfalls sounded along the path outside as two people walked slowly towards the row of huts.

A moment later, the clear, crisp voice of a girl cut through the stillness of the night: "Mother, there is a light in the house ahead. We have arrived." Her high pitch indicated that she was very young in age.

By and by, an older voice asked, "Child, are you tired?"

"No, I am not," the little girl replied. "Mother, you will not hurt after the physician cures your illness."

"Yes," answered the woman. "But I do not know if the physician is willing to treat me."

Zhang Wuji was taken aback: The woman's voice is very familiar! She sounds like Auntie Ji Xiaofu!

At that moment, the little girl spoke again: "The physician will definitely treat you. Mother, do not be afraid. Are you feeling better yet?"

"Just a little better," said the woman. "Sigh, my poor long-suffering child ... "

By then, Zhang Wuji had no more doubts. He rushed to the door of the hut and called out: "Auntie Ji, is that you? Are you wounded too?"

A woman dressed in blue came into view, holding a little girl by the hand. She was indeed the Lady Warrior Ji Xiaofu of the E-mei School. When she last saw Zhang Wuji on Mount Wudang, he was not even ten years old. Almost five years had passed since then, and the little boy had grown into a teenager. Thus, she could hardly recognise him.

"Auntie Ji, do you still remember me?" asked the boy again. "I am Zhang Wuji. We met once on Mount Wudang, when my parents passed away."

Ji Xiaofu gasped in shocked, for she had never expected to run into him in this isolated valley. Suddenly very conscious about her status as an unwed mother, she turned very red with shame. After all, Zhang Wuji was the nephew of her fiancé, Yin Liting. Although he was young, it was still very difficult for her to explain herself. Unfortunately, the emotional turmoil caused by this unexpected meeting was too much for her weakened body, so she collapsed.

Her daughter grabbed her arm at once, but what could a eight- or nine-year-old child do to stop the fall of an adult? As a result, both mother and child crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Zhang Wuji quickly propped Ji Xiaofu up by the shoulders and said, "Auntie Ji, please take a rest inside." Helping her indoors, he soon saw that her left shoulder and arm had been slashed several times. Blood was still seeping through the bandages that she had put over the wounds, and a light but persistent cough accompanied her throughout. By then, Zhang Wuji's abilities in treating illnesses had surpassed those of the so-called 'renowned physicians', so he could tell immediately from her coughs that her lungs had been hurt. "Auntie Ji, you hurt the Taiyin Channel of the Lung when you used your right palm against your opponent's hand," he said.

Then, he took seven gold needles out and inserted them through her clothes into the Yun Men acupoint on her shoulder, the Hua Gai (Hua2 Gai4) acupoint on her chest, the Chi Ze acupoint on her elbow and four other points along the Taiyin Channel of the Lung. His skills had improvedly vastly since the day he treated Chang Yuchun, for he had spent the past two years in diligent study under the tutelage of Hu Qingniu. While his ability to diagnose ailments and prescribe medication was still limited by experience, his skill in acupuncture had reached seven- or eight-tenths of the prowess of the Healing Sage.

Ji Xiaofu was somewhat apprehensive when she saw the gold needles, but Zhang Wuji was so fast with his hands that the needles entered her acupoints in the blink of an eye, granting immediate relief for the congestion in her chest. Startled but delighted, Ji Xiaofu said, "Dear child, I never expected to see you here, much less with this marvellous set of skills."

Years ago on Mount Wudang, Ji Xiaofu had witnessed the double-suicide of Zhang Cuishan and Yin Susu. Overcome with compassion for the little orphan that the couple left

behind, she had comforted the child and offered him her necklace of gold. However, Zhang Wuji had been so angry and upset that he had blamed all the visitors for his parents' deaths. Therefore, he had rejected Ji Xiaofu's gift and left her standing in embarrassment. As he grew older, he found out that his father and uncles had originally planned to join hands with the warriors of E-mei against their opponents. Thus, he finally learnt that the E-mei School was a friend, not a foe. As for Ji Xiaofu, he had often recalled her kindness towards him with a grateful heart.

More recently, Zhang Wuji and Chang Yuchun had seen how Ji Xiaofu had taken a great risk in rescuing Monk Peng (i.e. Peng Yingyu). Therefore, in his mind, this Auntie Ji was a very good person. He was too young to understand the details behind her being an unwed mother or judge whether she had done his Uncle Yin wrong, so he had not retained the information that he had heard in the woods that night. Unfortunately, Ji Xiaofu had been carrying a guilty conscience all this time, so she found this sudden meeting with someone who knew Yin Liting terribly embarrassing. She did not know that Zhang Wuji had heard everything about her from Ding Minjun two years earlier. Since he saw Ding Minjun as a wicked woman, the things that she had said were probably not as bad as she had made them out to be. Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the little girl beside Ji Xiaofu. Pretty as a picture, the girl stared curiously at him with a pair of big and dark eyes before whispering, "Mother, is this boy the physician?"

The word 'Mother' caused Ji Xiaofu to redden at once. But there was really nothing more that she could do to keep the matter under wraps. So, she replied awkwardly, "This is an older brother from the Zhang family. His father was a friend of mine." Then, she turned to Zhang Wuji and said, "She ... she is called 'Buhui'." After a pause, she added, "Her surname

is Yang ... Yang Buhui!"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "That is great. Little Sister, your name is very similar to mine. I am called Zhang Wuji - 'No Resentments' - while you are Yang Buhui - 'No Regrets'."

Seeing that Zhang Wuji did not react to her introduction of her daughter with shock or accusation, Ji Xiaofu heaved a silent sigh of relief. Then, she said to her daughter, "Elder Brother Wuji is very skilful. I do not hurt very much anymore."

Yang Buhui's lively eyes regarded Zhang Wuji for a moment. Then, she went forward, gave the boy a big hug and kissed him on the cheek. Besides her mother, she had never seen anyone else all her life. Therefore, she was very grateful that Zhang Wuji had reduced the pain and discomfort that her mother felt. Since she had always expressed joy and gratitude towards her mother by hugging and kissing her, she had done the same to the boy.

Ji Xiaofu smiled and said, "Bu-er, do not do that. Brother Wuji does not like it."

Yang Buhui opened her eyes wide in surprise, turned to Zhang Wuji and asked, "You do not like it? Why do you not want me to be nice to you?"

Laughing in amusement, the boy replied, "I like it. I want to be nice to you too." He leaned forward and gave her a gentle peck on the cheek.

Yang Buhui clapped her hands. "Little Physician," she said, "quickly make my mother completely well again and I will give you another kiss."

Zhang Wuji found the innocent and lively little girl very adorable. All his life, he had known only people who were old enough to be his uncles. Although he treated Chang Yuchun as a brother and vice-versa, the man was still eight years older than he. Other than Zhou Zhiruo whom he had met for barely a day, he had never had any friends of his age. Therefore, he could not help but say to himself: If I had such a cute little sister, I would take her out to play everyday. After all, at fourteen years old, he was still very much a child, but the rough circumstances of his childhood had not given him many opportunities for fun and play.

Then, Ji Xiaofu noticed that Jian Jie and the other wounded visitors had not received any treatment yet. Unwilling to jump the queue, she said, "They arrived earlier than I, so you had better attend to them first. I am already feeling much better."

"They came to seek treatment from Mr Hu but he is too ill to see them," answered Zhang Wuji. "Yet, they have refused to leave. Auntie Ji, I have lived here long enough to pick up some basic medical skills, so if you can trust me, I will take a look at your injuries. After all, you did not mention that you are seeking help from Mr Hu."

In fact, Ji Xiaofu had wanted to ask the Hu Qingniu for assistance, for she had been in the same boat as Jian Jie and the others. After they were wounded, someone had told them to come to Butterfly Valley for treatment. Now that Zhang Wuji had made the offer to treat her, she quickly realised that the 'One who Ignores the Dying' was living up to his name. Since the initial course of acupuncture had proven to be rather effective, she knew that Zhang Wuji's skills were far better than 'basic'. Thus, she said, "Thank you very much. Since the Great Master refuses to provide treatment, the Little Master can do it just the same."

Ushering the woman into a room, Zhang Wuji cut her sleeve away with a pair of scissors and found three sabre slashes on her arm. The bones in the arm were broken, with a spot in the upper arm where the pieces of bone had been smashed to smithereens. This terribly fragmented section was particularly difficult to fix, yet it was just a simple matter in the eyes of the disciple of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley. Thus, Zhang Wuji began setting the bones in Ji Xiaofu's arm before applying a concoction that would aid in the healing of the open wounds on it. Then, he wrote up a prescription and instructed one of the pages to have the soup prepared. This being his maiden attempt at setting broken bones, his hands were rather clumsy. So, he struggled for a shichen (two hours) or so before everything was finally in place and bandaged. "Auntie Ji," he said, "please take a nap. When the anaesthetic wears off, the wounds are going to hurt quite badly."

"Thank you very much!" said Ji Xiaofu in gratitude.

After that, Zhang Wuji went off to get some dates and almonds for Yang Buhui, but by the time he returned, the tired little girl had already fallen asleep by her mother's side. He placed the snacks in her pocket and went out of the room.

The swarthy man from the School of Mount Hua stood up as soon as Zhang Wuji appeared. Bowing low before the boy, he said, "Young sir, since Mr Hu is ill, we have no alternative but to seek your assistance for our injuries. For this, we offer our utmost gratitude in advance."

Since he began his studies in medicine, Zhang Wuji had never provided treatment for anyone, except Chang Yuchun and Ji Xiaofu. Consequently, he was very tempted to try his skills out on these fourteen men who bore a variety of

internal injuries, broken limbs and other strange ailments. Then, remembering Hu Qingniu's words, he said, "This is Mr Hu's home and I am only a patient of his. How would I dare to make such a decision?"

Seeing that he did not make an outright refusal to provide treatment, the swarthy man decided to motivate the boy with a little praise. "The renowned physicians of the past were all old men in their fifties and sixties," he said, "so we did not realise that a young man like you could have such profound skills. This occurrence is so rare that we hope to experience your prowess."

The fat man, whose surname was Liang, added, "The fourteen of us have minor reputations in the realm of the rivers and lakes. If you cure our ailments, young sir, we will go out and publicise your abilities as a miraculous physician. Within a day, your name will be renowned across the land."

Young and inexperienced, Zhang Wuji did not really understand the ways of the world. Therefore, he could not help but feel pleased with the men's praises. "What benefit is there in being renowned across the land?" he said. "Since Mr Hu is unwilling to treat you, there is nothing I can do. But your injuries are really quite serious ... let me put it this way: I will help to reduce some of your pain and discomfort." With some multi-purpose ointment in hand, he began helping the wounded men.

But he was totally unprepared for what he found. Not only were the men's injuries different from one another, the injuries themselves were so strange and shocking that they were not even mentioned in the comprehensive books that Hu Qingniu had written. One of the men had been forced to swallow several dozen poisoned steel needles. Another man had his liver wounded by internal strength, but the Xing Jian

(Xing² Jian¹), Zhong Feng (Zhong¹ Feng¹), Yin Bao (Yin¹ Bao¹) and Wu Li (Wu³ Li³) acupoints that were needed to treat the liver had been slashed to bits with a sharp knife. Apparently, the perpetrator of these injuries had a profound knowledge of medicine as well, so he could ensure that his victims were not easily cured. Then, there was the man whose lungs were punctured with a long iron nail each. He coughed and threw up blood continuously. Another man had all the ribs on both sides of his body totally broken, but none of these broken bones punctured his heart or lungs. Yet another fellow had both his hands chopped off, but the perpetrator had taken time to connect the left hand on the right wrist, and vice-versa. Now, the switched limbs had begun to set. And there was the man who was blue, black and swollen all over. Apparently, he had been stung by twenty different poisonous insects and pests, including the centipede, the scorpion and the wasp.

Zhang Wuji had seen only six or seven of the fourteen men, but they were enough to bring a frown to his brow: Their injuries are so strange that I cannot even cure a single one of them. Why did the perpetrator rack his brains and come up with such terrible forms of torture? Suddenly, a thought hit him: The wounds on Auntie Ji's shoulder and arm are too common, so she must have suffered some strange internal injuries as well, for how could her case be different? He ran into the room and took Ji Xiaofu's pulse. Erratic and irregular, her pulse indicated that something had gone horribly wrong with her internal organs. Yet, he had no idea as to why and how it happened.

Zhang Wuji was not particularly concerned about the conditions of the fourteen men. After all, they included the people from the Kongdong School who had a hand in forcing his parents to their deaths, so they deserved every bit of their strange sentences. But Ji Xiaofu's injuries had to be

treated at all costs, so he walked over to Hu Qingniu's room and said, "Sir, are you asleep?"

"What is it?" asked the physician. "I do not care who it is outside, for I will not treat a single one of them."

"Yes," said Zhang Wuji. "But their injuries are very very strange." Then, he proceeded to describe everything that he had seen.

Hu Qingniu listened attentively from bed, sending the boy outside every now and then to clarify certain conditions that sounded vague. The process took almost an hour before the injuries of all fifteen people were completely described in gory detail. The physician punctuated the reports with numerous "Mmm, Mmm", as if he was thinking hard about them. Finally, he said, "Hmmp! These strange injuries are nothing to me ... "

Suddenly, a voice behind Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, the owner of the golden flower wants us to tell you this: 'You have called yourself the Sage of Healing in vain, for I do not think that you will be able to cure even one of these fifteen ailments.' Ha ha, sure enough, you are now holed up in your room, pretending to be ill."

Turning around, Zhang Wuji saw that the voice belonged to the bald old man from the Kongdong School, Jian Jie. Initially, the boy had thought that the old fellow was naturally bald, but he later discovered that his hair had fallen out after a corrosive poison was applied on his head. Furthermore, the poison had begun seeping through the scalp and the skull towards the brain. It would be just a matter of days before the man went completely mad. Meanwhile, his companions had secured his hands with iron chains, so that he could not scratch his terribly itchy scalp down to the bone.

Hu Qingniu was unfazed. "It does not matter to me whether I can cure you or not," he said calmly. "The point is that I will never treat your ailments. You have seven or eight days of life left, so if you hurry home now, you will still be able to see your family members, sons and daughters for the last time. After all, what benefit is there in nagging me?"

Tortured by the persistent itch on his scalp, Jian Jie knocked his head against the wall and rattled the chains on his hands. "Mr Hu," he growled in a breathless voice, "the owner of the golden flower will come for you sooner or later, and you will probably suffer a terrible death. If we join hands and fight together against this enemy, would it not be better than hiding in this room and waiting for your doom?"

"If you can defeat him, you would have had him killed a long time ago!" answered Hu Qingniu. "What is the use of having fifteen useless helpers?"

Jian Jie pleaded for a while, but Hu Qingniu did not pay him further attention. Finally, the frustrated man shouted: "All right, since either way leads to death, I will burn this dog's den down! We will enter with white sabres, and exit with red ones. After we dispatch this crooked physician, we will meet our ends!"

Just then, another man appeared. He was the swarthy fellow who had been throwing up blood. Pulling out a steel Moth-Antennae Spike (e2 mei2 gang1 ci4) and pressing it against Jian Jie's chest, he said coldly, "If you offend Elder Hu, I will be the first to take you to task. You want to enter with white sabres and exit with red ones? All right, I will let you experience it first."

Jian Jie was the better-skilled pugilist between the two, but

he could not fight back because of the chains around his hands. So he just opened his eyes wide and glared at his opponent.

Raising his voice, the swarthy man announced: "Elder Hu, I am Xue Gongyuan, a disciple of School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua. I would like to pay you my respects!" He knelt and kowtowed several times.

A glimmer of hope appeared in Jian Jie's heart: Since Hu Qingniu refuses to respond to force, this fellow's kowtows and gentle pleadings may just do the trick.

Then, Xue Gongyuan said, "It is our misfortune that you are ill, Elder Hu. But there is a little brother here whose knowledge of medicine is brilliant. Thus, we would like to request your permission for him to treat us. After all, there is no one else in the world who can cure our strange ailments, except for the disciple of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley."

"This child is called Zhang Wuji," Hu Qingniu answered coldly. "He is a disciple of the Wudang School, the son of the Silver Hook and Iron Stroke Zhang Cuishan the Fifth, and the grand-disciple of Zhang Sanfeng. Hu Qingniu is a member of the Ming Sect, the scum of society that is despised by your renowned and upright clans. So what have I do to with a disciple of a great teacher like him? He came to me for help because he has been poisoned, but I have sworn that I will treat no one, except the members of the Ming Sect. This little fellow is unwilling to join my organisation, so how can I save his life?"

Half of Xue Gongyuan's hopes vanished into thin air. He had initially thought that Zhang Wuji was Hu Qingniu's disciple. Therefore, the physician would definitely provide the boy

with pointers if he ran into difficulties during the process of treatment. He had never expected that Zhang Wuji would turn out to be yet another hapless patient whose request for assistance had been flatly refused.

"So you want to hang around, eh?" Hu Qingniu went on. "Hmmpf, hmmpf, do you think that I will become kind-hearted all of sudden? Ask this little fellow how long he has been hanging around my place."

When Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie turned to Zhang Wuji, they saw him hold up two fingers and gesture twice with them. "Twenty days?" asked Xue Gongyuan.

"Two years and two months to the day," answered Zhang Wuji.

Jian and Xue exchanged a glance and sighed.

"He can go ahead and stay here for another ten years," said Hu Qingniu, "but I still cannot save his life. In twelve months, the deadly toxins that have accumulated in his internal organs will begin their final work, and he will not live to see this day next year. I swore an oath before the Ming Lord years ago, hence I cannot provide treatment for anyone who is not a member of the Ming Sect, even if they are my own father, son and daughter."

As Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan began walking out in deep disappointment, Hu Qingniu suddenly said, "This teenager from the Wudang School knows a little about medicine. Although the knowledge of Wudang is far beneath our Ming Sect, it is not poor enough to kill anyone. Therefore, the Wudang School can go ahead and provide treatment, or turn away and ignore the dying. Its decision, however, has absolutely nothing to do with the Ming Sect and Hu Qingniu."

Xue Gongyuan was taken aback, for the physician sounded as if he wanted Zhang Wuji to treat their ailments. "Elder Hu," said the man quickly, "if this Young Hero Zhang is willing to save us, we will have hope once more."

"What has that got to do with me?" snapped Hu Qingniu. "Listen up, Wuji. You cannot practise medicine as you wish in the house of Hu Qingniu. But once you step out of my door, I can no longer control what you do."

Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie glanced dumbly at each other, unsure of what the physician meant by his words.

Fortunately, Zhang Wuji was a lot smarter than they. Knowing what Hu Qingniu had in mind, he said to Xue and Jian, "Mr Hu is ill, so you should not disturb him more than necessary. Please come with me." When the three of them reached the hall, Zhang Wuji said, "Gentlemen, I am young and my knowledge is shallow. Your injuries are so strange that I do not have full confidence in curing them. If you can trust me, please allow me to do my best. As for the results, we will leave them in the hands of the Heavens."

By then, the men were so tortured by their injuries that they were willing to drink arsenic and poison for momentary relief. Therefore, they were absolutely delighted to hear Zhang Wuji's words.

"Mr Hu does not allow me to do anything in his house," the boy went on, "so that his reputation as the 'Sage of Healing' will not be damaged if anyone dies. Please step outside."

The men hesitated, for they knew that this fourteen- or fifteen-year-old lad was limited in knowledge and experience. If they remained in the house of the 'Sage of Healing', they

could still look to the renowned physician himself for assurance. But if they stepped outside, they might just end up suffering additional yet totally unnecessary pain in the bumbling hands of this young man.

Suddenly, Jian Jie exclaimed: "The itch on my scalp is killing me! Little Brother, please attend to me first." Dragging his chains noisily behind him, he walked out of the door.

After a moment's thought, Zhang Wuji went to the room where a variety medicinal ingredients were kept, and brought out ten different herbs and minerals, including Nanxing (nan2 xing1), Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root (fang2 feng1), Dahurian Angelica Root (bai2 zhi3), Gastrodia Tuber (tian1 ma2), Notopterygium (qiang1 huo2), Typhonium Tuber (bai2 fu4 zi3) and opicalcite (hua1 rui4 shi2). Then, he instructed one of the pages to crush the herbs and minerals in the mortar with some hot wine, before applying resulting paste on Jian Jie's bald pate.

The old man jumped up and yelled in pain when the paste touched his scalp, shouting, "Ouch! It hurts terribly! But this pain is a lot more comfortable than that horrible itch!" Walking around the grass with chattering teeth, he added, "Pain is wonderful! Damn, this pipsqueak is better than I thought. No ... Young Hero Zhang, I should really be thanking you for your help instead."

The fast and positive effect of Zhang Wuji's treatment on Jian Jie's itch caused the other men to rush forward with their respective needs. At that moment, one of them started rolling on the ground, holding on to his stomach and crying out in pain. It turned out that he had been forced to swallow more than thirty live leeches. Having survived the ingestion, the leeches had eventually attached themselves to the walls of their victim's stomach and intestines, sucking his blood for

all their worth. Zhang Wuji recalled a passage that he had read: Leeches disintegrate upon contact with honey. There was plenty of honey in Butterfly Valley, so he obtained a large bowl of it from one of the pages and instructed the man to consume the entire serving at once.

Then, he proceeded to the other men, attending diligently to each successive patient until daybreak. When Ji Xiaofu and her daughter woke up and went outside, they found that Zhang Wuji had been working so hard that he was drenched in perspiration. Ji Xiaofu offered her help immediately, bandaging open wounds and fetching medicines as required. On the other hand, little Yang Buhui ran around the valley, snacking on almonds and dates and chasing butterflies without a single care.

By the time Zhang Wuji had finished with the initial course of treatment for all fourteen men, it was already past noon. But their ailments were so strange and complex that it was insufficient to deal just only with the external symptoms and signs. Zhang Wuji went to his room to get some sleep, only to be jolted awake several hours later by loud cries of pain. He jumped up and went to check on his patients at once. A few of them seemed better, but many more had taken a turn for the worse. Lost for ideas, he went to tell Hu Qingniu what had happened so far.

"These fellows are not members of the Ming Sect," said the physician coldly. "Who cares if they are dead or alive?"

Then, Zhang Wuji had a flash of inspiration. "If there was a member of the Ming Sect who did not have any external injuries," he said, "but his face was swollen red and his abdomen was filled with blood clots, how would you deal with him?"

"If he was a member of the Ming Sect," answered Hu Qingniu, "I would give him a decoction of water, wine, pangolin scales (shan1 jia3), the end-roots of the Chinese Angelica (gui1 wei3), safflower (hong2 hua1), the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Lingxian (ling2 xian1), Dragon's Blood (xue4 jie2, the resin of the Calamus Gum), Taoxian (tao2 xian1), rhubarb (da4 huang2), frankincense (ru3 xiang1) and myrrh (mo4 yao4), with some urine from boys under twelve (tong2 bian4). He will pass the blood clots out after that.

Zhang Wuji asked again: "What if someone filled the left and right ears of a Ming Sect member with lead and mercury respectively, before pouring raw lacquer into his eyes?"

"Who dares to do such a horrible thing to a member of the Ming Sect?" roared Hu Qingniu in anger.

"Yes, that person is terribly vicious," answered Zhang Wuji. "But I think that we should cure the ears and eyes of this Ming Sect member first, before asking him who his enemy is and where he can be found."

Hu Qingniu thought for a moment and said, "If the victim was a member of the Ming Sect, I would pour mercury into his left ear. The pieces of lead would dissolve in the mercury and flow out of the ear. Then, I would put a gold needle into the right ear and draw the mercury out bit by bit. As for the raw lacquer, a juice made from crabs might work."

Zhang Wuji went on in this manner, turning the ailments of his patients into injuries suffered by fictitious Ming Sect members, until Hu Qingniu had given him the answers to all fifteen problems. The physician knew what the boy was up to, of course, but he taught him all the same. Unfortunately, some of these injuries were so strange and complex that the suggested treatments did not work. Therefore, Hu Qingniu

had to put in additional effort and thought before the appropriate cures were found.

After five or six days, the patients began showing signs of improvement. As for Ji Xiaofu, her internal injury had been caused by poison. After Zhang Wuji had ascertained its roots, he had combatted it with a decoction of raw fossil fragments (sheng1 long2 gu3), perilla (su1 mu4), mole cricket (tu2 gou3), Troglodytes dung (wu3 ling2 zhi1), Caper Euphorbia seed (qian1 jin1 zi3) and powdered toad (ge2 fen3). Thus, when he checked on her pulse, he found that it had become rather steady, though it was still a little weak. Her injury had indeed begun to heal.

By then, the patients had built themselves a large canopy outside Hu Qingniu's row of huts, using it as a simple shelter from sun and rain as they recuperated on piles of straw and grass. Ji Xiaofu and her daughter had a tiny shed of their own several zhang (1 zhang = 3.33 metres) away, the result of a request by Zhang Wuji that the fourteen wounded men did not dare to decline. After all, the lives of these rough-and-tumble men who roamed the length and the breadth of the realm of the rivers and lakes were in the boy's hands.

Life had suddenly become rather busy for Zhang Wuji, but he had also learnt quite a few new techniques and prescriptions from Hu Qingniu. The experience had proven to be beneficial so far.

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One morning, Zhang Wuji discovered a slight darkening of the skin on Ji Xiaofu's brow, as if her internal injuries had recurred. He quickly took her pulse and asked her to provide some saliva for a test, eventually confirming that the poison in her body had returned. Zhang Wuji could not figure out

what had happened, so he went to ask Hu Qingniu for help. The physician sighed and told him what to do. Sure enough, the treatment worked immediately. Then, Jian Jie's scalp began to rot and give out a terribly foul smell. The fifteen patients had regained eight- or nine-tenths of their health in the past few days, yet in a single night, everyone had taken a turn for the worse.

Zhang Wuji did not understand how this happened, so he turned to Hu Qingniu for an opinion.

"All of them have suffered extraordinary injuries," said the physician. "If they could be easily healed, why would they need to come to Butterfly Valley and beg me for help?"

That night, the boy lay in bed and thought: It is common for injuries to recur, but it is way too strange for such a thing to happen to all fifteen people at the same time. Furthermore, their conditions seem to change again and again. The matter kept him awake until the third watch of the night (11.00 p.m. to 1.00 a.m.) had passed.

Suddenly, he heard the soft crushing of fallen leaves as someone walked quietly past his window. His curiosity aroused, Zhang Wuji made a hole in the paper covering of his window and peered outside. He saw a figure flash by, before disappearing behind a Chinese scholartree (huai² shu⁴). It looked like Hu Qingniu.

Why is Mr Hu not in bed? the boy asked himself. Has he recovered from smallpox?

But the physician's movements seemed to indicate an unwillingness to be seen by others. After a while, he crept towards the tiny shed that Ji Xiaofu and her daughter slept in.

Zhang Wuji's heart began to thump loudly as he thought: Has he gone to hurt Auntie Ji? I am not his match, but I cannot let this matter pass unheeded. Climbing out of the window, he followed Hu Qingniu as quietly as he could. Then, he saw the man sneak into Ji Xiaofu's shed. The shed had been put up haphazardly as a simple shelter against wind and rain, so it had no doors or walls to keep intruders out.

Zhang Wuji panicked and made his way quickly to the back of the shed. Crouching close to the ground, he saw Ji Xiaofu and her daughter sleeping soundly on a pile of straw. Meanwhile, Hu Qingniu took a medicinal pellet out of his shirt and put it into Ji Xiaofu's bowl of medicine before leaving as quietly as he had come. Zhang Wuji saw that the physician's face was still covered by the piece of black cloth. As he wondered whether the man had recovered from smallpox, a sudden and somewhat frightening realisation hit him: Mr Hu has been tampering secretly with the patients' medications during the night! That is why their injuries have not been healing.

Then, he saw Hu Qingniu entering the canopy where Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan and the others slept, apparently to poison them as well. The physician did not re-appear for a long time, probably because each of the fourteen men required a different prescription. Zhang Wuji stepped quietly into Ji Xiaofu's shed and took a whiff of her bowl of medicine. It had originally contained a dose of Eight Immortals Soup (ba1 xian1 tang1), which she was supposed to drink first thing in the morning. Now, the decoction emitted a pungent smell. Just then, light footsteps sounded outside, indicating that the physician was returning to his room.

Putting the bowl down, Zhang Wuji called out softly: "Auntie Ji, Auntie Ji!"

As an accomplished pugilist, Ji Xiaofu's hearing and sight were very keen, so she would wake up at the slightest noise even when she was in a deep sleep. However, she was not aroused despite several calls from Zhang Wuji. The boy had to shake her on the shoulder seven or eight times before she finally opened her eyes and asked, "Who is it?"

"Auntie Ji, it is I, Wuji," he answered. "Your bowl of medicine has been poisoned, so you cannot drink it anymore. Pour it quietly into the river, and pretend that nothing is wrong. I will discuss the details with you tomorrow."

Ji Xiaofu nodded in agreement.

Then, fearing that Hu Qingniu might chance upon them, Zhang Wuji returned to his window and climbed back into his room.

After breakfast the next morning, Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui went butterfly-chasing, running further and further away from Hu Qingniu's huts and the wounded men's canopy. Ji Xiaofu knew what the boy was up to, so she quickly followed them. Having seen Zhang Wuji take Yang Buhui out to play for the past few days, no one bothered about the three of them going off on their own. When they reached a hill about a li (500 metres) away, Zhang Wuji sat down.

Ji Xiaofu turned to her daughter and said, "Bu-er, let us not chase butterflies anymore. Go and look for some wildflowers and make three crowns, one for each of us."

Beaming with delight, the little girl went off as she was told.

Zhang Wuji opened the discussion with a question: "Auntie Ji, what conflict does that Hu Qingniu have with you? Why does

he want to poison you?"

"I have never met Mr Hu," answered Ji Xiaofu, somewhat taken aback by the boy's train of thought. "I have never even seen his face to this day, so what conflict is there between us?" After a moment's pause, she added, "When Father and Teacher talk about Mr Hu, they mention only his unsurpassed abilities in medicine and refer to him as the best physician in the land. It is really a pity that he has chosen to walk in heretical ways as a member of the Ming Sect. My father and my teacher do not know him either. Why ... why does he want to poison me?"

Zhang Wuji proceeded to tell her how he had seen Hu Qingniu sneak into her shed to poison her the night before. Then, he said, "Your bowl of Eight Immortals Soup emitted the pungent smells of the venus-hair fern (tie3 xian4 cao3) and the Bone-Piercing Fungus (tou4 gu3 jun1). These two plants have certain medicinal properties but they are too poisonous to be used in heavy doses. They are also counteractive to the healing properties of the eight herbs in the Eight Immortals Soup. Although the dosages that had been used were insufficient to kill, they would have nevertheless prevented the complete recovery of your injuries."

"It is even more puzzling that the other fourteen men are also affected," Ji Xiaofu remarked. "Even if my father or the E-meì School had offended Mr Hu by accident, all these fellows could not have been involved as well. It is just too coincidental to be true."

Undaunted, the boy pressed on with his queries. "Auntie Ji, Butterfly Valley is very remote," he said. "How did you manage to find this place? Who is that 'owner of the golden flower' who hurt you?" After a slight pause, he added,

"Perhaps, I should not be asking you about these matters because they do not really concern me. But the entire episode has been so strange. Please do not be offended."

Ji Xiaofu turned red, for she understood the meaning behind Zhang Wuji's words -- he was concerned that his questions might be related to her being an unwed mother, hence answering them would put her in a very awkward position. Yet, she went ahead and gave him a reply: "You saved my life, so what else is there that I should keep from you? Furthermore, you treat Bu-er and me very well. You may be young, but you are also the only one in this entire world whom I can share the deepest difficulties of my heart with."

Wiping the tears in her eyes away with a handkerchief, she went on: "Since a misunderstanding with one of my elder sisters-at-arms two years ago, I have not dared to see my teacher or go home ... "

"Hmmp! That 'Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun' is horrible!" Zhang Wuji said at once. "Auntie, you do not have to be afraid of her."

Ji Xiaofu gasped in surprise. "Eh, how did you know about this?" she asked.

After the boy told her how he and Chang Yuchun had seen her rescuing Monk Peng in the woods, she sighed quietly and said, "I should never have done anything that I do not want others to know about! How could my actions have escaped the ears and the eyes of men?"

"Sixth Uncle Yin is a very good man," said Zhang Wuji. "But if you do not like him, what is wrong with not marrying him? When I see Uncle Yin, I will ask him not to insist on it any longer."

Ji Xiaofu could not help but smile miserably at the boy's naive and simple view. "Child, I did not intentionally set out to do your Sixth Uncle Yin wrong," she said gently. "I had no alternatives then, but ... but now, I have no regrets about it either ... " Then, she thought: This child's heart is like a blank piece of paper, so I had better not tell him about the intimate affairs between men and women. Besides, they do not seem to be related to the issue on hand.

Thus, she continued: "After falling out with Sister Ding, I did not return to E-mei again. Instead, I took Bu-er and went to Mount Shungeng, about three hundred li (150 km) west of Butterfly Valley, where we led carefree and peaceful lives among woodcutters and farmers for more than two years. Half a month ago, Bu-er and I went to town to buy cloth for some new clothes. There, I came upon a fresh chalk drawing of a small sword surrounded by rays of light in the corner of a wall. It was a coded call for disciples of the E-mei School. I became very frightened after seeing it, but I soon realised that it was not my fault for falling out with Sister Ding. I have also not done anything to deceive my teacher or betray my school. Therefore, I decided to answer the call, just in case it was left by a schoolmate in trouble. So, with Bu-er in hand, I followed the trail of drawings to Fengyang.

"Within Fengyang City itself, another drawing led us to the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant. There were already seven or eight members of the martial arts circle there, including Kongdong's Jian Jie as well as Mount Hua's Xue Gongyuan and his two brothers, but there were no E-mei disciples.

"I had met Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan before, so I quickly found out from them that they too had followed the coded drawings of their respective clans all the way to Fengyang. But no one knew what the call was really about.

"After waiting for a day, no other E-mei disciples arrived. Instead, a few more pugilists from other organisations appeared, including those from the Clan of the Exquisite Fists (Shen² Quan² Men²) and the Beggars' Gang (Gai⁴ Bang¹). They too said that they had come to the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant after seeing the coded drawings of their respective organisations. Several more people turned up on the second day for the same reason, but the sender of these calls did not appear. Doubts crept into our hearts: Have we all been tricked by the enemy?

"By then, fifteen people from nine different clans had responded to this strange gathering in the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant. The coded drawings differed from one organisation to another, of course, and each guarded its own closely. No one, except for the members of the clans themselves, knew what these marks meant. If this gathering was really a work of treachery, how could the enemy have known the secret symbols of nine different clans? Unwilling to put Bu-er at risk or see any of my schoolmates, I decided to go home. After all, it was clear that this was not a call for help.

"Just as I was about to leave the restaurant, loud tapping sounds were heard on the stairs, as if someone was coming up with the help of a pole or crutch. A series of coughs followed, and a silver-haired old woman with a hunched back came into view. She coughed painfully as she walked, supported by a young girl about twelve or thirteen years old. I moved aside at once, allowing the ill and elderly woman to come up the stairs first. Her young helper had a refined air and a pretty face. On the other hand, the old woman, with her bleached walking stick and plain clothes, looked like a poor peasant. Yet, she had a shiny rosary in her left hand. When I took a closer look, I realised that the beads of her

rosary were actually plum blossoms made from yellow gold ...
"

"So this old woman is the 'owner of the golden flower'?" asked Zhang Wuji in surprise.

"That is right!" answered Ji Xiaofu with a nod. "But who would have thought of such a thing at that moment?" Reaching into her pocket, she brought out a small plum blossom made of gold. It looked exactly like the one that Zhang Wuji had shown Hu Qingniu barely a week earlier.

The boy was amazed, for he had expected the 'owner of the golden flower' to be a horribly vicious and terribly formidable man. Yet, according to Ji Xiaofu's description, the enemy had turned out to be a sickly old woman.

Ji Xiaofu went on: "After the old woman reached the top of the stairs, she began to cough. The young girl said, 'Grandmother, perhaps you should take some medicine.' As the old woman nodded in agreement, the girl opened a small porcelain bottle and poured a medicinal pellet out. The old woman swallowed the pellet with much difficulty before saying a series of 'Amitabha!'. Then, with her eyes half-closed, she mumbled, 'Only fifteen ... mmm, ask them: Has anyone from the schools of Wudang and Kunlun arrived?'

"No one had paid her much attention when she first came up the stairs, so everyone was taken aback by her sudden remarks. A few of the men turned around at once, but they quickly dismissed what they had heard at the sight of this old and senile-looking peasant woman. The young girl raised her voice and said, 'Hey, my grandmother asks you: Has anyone from the schools of Wudang and Kunlun arrived?' Shocked, no one answered her. After a while, Kongdong's Jian Jie said, 'Young lady, what did you just say?' The girl answered with a question of her own: 'My grandmother asks: Why are the

disciples of Wudang and Kunlun not here?' 'Who are you?' asked Jian Jie again. Just then, the old woman bent over and began another series of coughs.

"Suddenly, a strong gust of wind came towards my chest. I did not know where it had come from, but it was incomparably fast. I quickly raised my palm to deflect it, only to have my chest block up with nausea. I sank to the floor and threw up several mouthfuls of blood. As I struggled to get a grip on things, I saw the old woman floating across the room, sending a palm to the right and a fist to the left amidst a series of coughs. Within moments, the other fourteen men were all struck down. These sudden, swift and strong movements left us with no opportunity to fight back, for we either had our acupoints blocked or our internal organs injured. Then, the old woman's left hand swept out and sent a gold blossom each into our arms. After that, she reached for the young girl, said 'Amitabha!' and hobbled down the stairs. It took quite a while before the tapping sounds of her walking stick and her coughs faded away."

At that moment, Yang Buhui returned with a floral crown that she had made. "Mother, this is for you," she said with a bright smile as she placed her handiwork on her mother's head.

Ji Xiaofu smiled appreciatively before continuing with her tale: "By then, all fifteen of us lay weak and limp on the floor of the restaurant. A few could still mumble and curse in anger, but some could hardly breathe ..."

"Mother, are you talking about that horrible old woman?" asked Yang Buhui suddenly. "Do not talk about her, please. She frightens me."

Comforting her daughter, Ji Xiaofu said, "Dear child, be good and go make another floral crown for Brother Wuji."

Yang Buhui turned to Zhang Wuji and asked, "What colour would you like?"

"Red," answered the boy. "And some white too. Make it as big as you can."

Stretching her arms out, the little girl asked again, "Like this?"

"Yes, like that," replied Zhang Wuji.

As she clapped her hands and skipped off, Yang Buhui said, "You had better wear it after I have finished."

Then, Ji Xiaofu resumed her story: "As I sat in a daze, the manager, winekeepers, cooks and other workers of the restaurant appeared, and dragged all of us off into the kitchen. Poor Bu-er wailed in fright and followed me as I was taken away. By and by, the manager looked up a written list, pointed to Jian Jie and said, 'Smear this ointment on his head.' A winekeeper carried the instruction out, using a pre-determined concoction. The manager referred to his list again, pointed to another fellow and said, 'Chop his right hand off, and connect it to his left arm.' Two cooks brought out a sharp cleaver and executed the order. I was fortunate to be spared of physical torture, but I was forced to consume a bowl of sweet liquid. I knew that the drink was poisonous, yet I did not have the ability to resist.

"After the fifteen of us had been handed our strange punishments, the manager said, 'You have been wounded seriously enough not to survive beyond half a month. But the owner of the golden flower says that she does not have any personal grudges against you. Thus, she has kindly provided you with a solution. You had better hurry to Butterfly Valley on the shores of Nüshan Lake and seek the help of the

Healing Sage Hu Qingniu. If he is willing to treat you, your lives will be spared, for there is no one else in this world who knows how to cure your injuries. But this Hu Qingniu is also known as 'The One who Ignores the Dying', for he will not help anyone who is not in dire straits. Tell Hu Qingniu that the owner of the golden flower will go and look for him soon, and ask him to make early preparations for his own funeral!' He concluded by giving us detailed directions to this place."

"Auntie Ji, does this mean that the manager, cooks and winekeepers of the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant are accomplices of the horrible old woman?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"I think they are her subordinates," answered Ji Xiaofu. "After all, the manager tortured us according to a list that was probably prepared by the wicked old woman herself. What I really do not understand is the reason behind her actions. If she had had any personal grievances against us, she could have had us killed with a mere finger. But if she wanted us to suffer intentionally by coming up with these terrible forms of torture, why then did she point us to Mr Hu for help? She has even declared that she will seek Mr Hu for revenge, so has she tormented us simply to test Mr Hu's medical skills?"

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and said, "Since this Old Woman of the Golden Flower is on her way here to make trouble for Mr Hu, it would only be right for him to cure your injuries. Then, everyone could stand together against this formidable foe. If that was not the case, he would not have taught me how to treat your injuries after making such a strong refusal to provide these treatments himself. The methods that he imparted to me have proven to be very effective, so it is clear that he wants to rescue all of you in the first place. What I really find puzzling is his act of poisoning all of you sneakily in the middle of the night. Why would he want you straddling between life and death?"

They discussed this question for a long time, but no one could come up with a likely answer. By and by, Yang Buhui appeared with a huge floral crown and set it on Zhang Wuji's head.

Finally, the boy said, "Auntie Ji, you must not take any more medicine, except for those that are served personally by me. You must also keep a weapon by your side at night, just in case someone wants to harm you. But you cannot leave Butterfly Valley yet. You have to take a few more decoctions and wait until your internal injuries are completely healed before fleeing with Little Sister Buhui."

Ji Xiaofu nodded in agreement. "Child, Mr Hu's ways have proven to be quite unfathomable," she added. "Thus, it is not a good idea for you to stay on with him. Perhaps, we should leave together."

"I understand your concern," said Zhang Wuji, "but he has actually been rather nice to me. He had initially planned to have me killed after removing the toxins in my body, but his treatments have failed. Therefore, he does not need to have me dispatched. I know that it is best that we leave immediately, but there are a few more aspects about the treatment of your injuries that I do not understand. I must ask Mr Hu about them."

"He has already tried to poison me in secret," said Ji Xiaofu, "so he will probably teach you the wrong methods on purpose."

"That is not necessarily so," answered Zhang Wuji. "The methods that Mr Hu has taught me so far have proven to be very effective. Besides, I can tell the difference between right and wrong. That is why this entire situation is so strange. I

was initially unwilling to leave Mr Hu at the mercy of the Owner of the Golden Flower, but now, I see that he is just pretending to be ill."

o0o

That night, Zhang Wuji did not go to sleep. At the third watch (between 11.00 p.m. and 1.00 a.m.), Hu Qingniu came out of his room just as the boy had expected, and sneaked into Ji Xiaofu's shed to poison her. This went on for three days, but Ji Xiaofu did not take any of the poison that had been added to her medicine. Therefore, she progressed quickly towards full recovery. On the other hand, Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan and the others alternated between recovery and deterioration. A few of the more bad-tempered men started to resent Zhang Wuji, saying that his medical skills were too poor. The boy paid them no attention, knowing that there was only one more night to go before he, Ji Xiaofu and her daughter would leave the place. Since the toxins in his own body could not be removed, he would not return to Mount Wudang and bring grief to his grandteacher and uncles. Instead, he would find a remote place and pass quietly away.

Just before going to bed, Zhang Wuji began to feel sad about leaving Butterfly Valley early the next morning: Although Hu Qingniu is an eccentric man, he has been rather nice to me. If he had not provided treatment for my injuries, how could I have survived to this day? He has also taught me much about medicine and its practices in the past two years.

Therefore, the boy found himself making his way to the physician's room to ask after him. Furthermore, he could not help but feel concerned that the Old Woman of the Golden Flower was on her way here to make trouble for the man. So, he asked, "Mr Hu, are you not bored of staying in Butterfly Valley? Why do you not go out and enjoy yourself for a bit?"

"I am ill, so how can I travel?" asked Hu Qingniu in return, somewhat surprised at the boy's questions.

"We can use a mule-drawn carriage," answered Zhang Wuji. "Just cover up the windows of the carriage with cloth, so that the wind does not enter. If you are willing to travel, I will accompany you."

Hu Qingniu sighed and said, "Child, you are very kind. Although the world is big, it is a pity that every place is the same as the next. How has your chest been in the past few days? Has a chill been rolling about in your lower abdomen?"

"The chill worsens from day to day," Zhang Wuji replied. "Since there is no cure for it, I have decided to let it run its course."

Hu Qingniu was quiet for a moment, before saying, "Let me give you a medical prescription that will save your life. Decoct the Chinese Angelica, the root of the thin-leaved milkwort, the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, the Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica and the Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root with pangolin scales during the second watch of the night (9.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m.). The brew must then be drunk immediately."

Zhang Wuji was shocked, for the five herbs that the physician had prescribed had absolutely nothing to do with his condition. These herbs even counteracted one another. It was even more unbelievable to use pangolin scales as a supplement to increase the efficacy of the resulting decoction. Therefore, he asked, "Sir, what are the dosages that should be used?"

"The stronger the better," snapped Hu Qingniu angrily. "I

have already told you everything, so why are you still hanging around?"

The physician had always seen the boy as a student and friend whenever they talked about medical practices and herbs, so he had never shouted so rudely before. As a result, Zhang Wuji could not help but stomp angrily back to his room. I advised you in good faith to go on a trip so that you could avoid harm, he thought, but you scolded me instead. You even gave me a prescription that does not make sense! Do you think that I would fall for it?

As he lay in bed and went over what Hu Qingniu had said, a thought suddenly hit him: The Chinese Angelica, the root of the thin-leaved milkwort ... how can these herbs be used in the strongest dosages possible? Unless ... unless the Chinese Angelica -- 'Dang Gui' -- is actually meant to convey 'gaidang guiqu' -- that 'I should return home'?

Similar interpretations followed: The root of the thin-leaved milkwort is 'Yuan Zhi'; it should mean 'zhi zai yuanfang, gaofei yuanzou' or 'go as far away as possible'. The meanings of the dried rhizome of Rehmannia and the Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica cannot be any clearer, because 'Sheng Di' and 'Du Huo' mean 'the place where one will be alive' and 'live on alone' respectively. He is telling me that fleeing in this manner is the only way to survive the impending doom. What about the Divaricate Saposchnikovia Root or 'Fang Feng'? Yes, it means 'xu fang zoulou fengsheng' or 'take the necessary precautions to prevent this secret from leaking out'. As for using pangolin scales or 'Chuan Shan Jia' as a supplement during the second watch of the night and consuming the brew immediately after decoction, he is telling me 'chuanshan taozou' or 'escape through the mountains' during the second watch. I should not use the road that runs through the valley.

Hu Qingniu's erroneous prescription began to make a lot of sense. As Zhang Wuji leapt out of bed, he thought: Mr Hu must have known that something terrible is about to happen, so he has kindly told me to leave at once. But the enemy has not arrived. Why then is he using this riddle, instead of speaking plainly? What if I fail to crack the code? The second watch has passed, so I had better hurry up and go. He figured that the physician probably had his own reasons for staying behind, with marvellous plans for dealing with the enemy. Although Hu Qingniu had asked him to 'Fang Feng' and 'Du Huo', Zhang Wuji could not leave without taking his Auntie Ji and her daughter along.

Thus, he crept quietly out of his room and headed into Ji Xiaofu's shed. To his surprise, he found someone bent over the woman as she lay on a pile of straw. Dressed in a blue robe and square hat, with a piece of black cloth around his face, the intruder was none other than Hu Qingniu himself. Ten thousand questions entered the boy's mind at once.

The physician pressed Ji Xiaofu's cheeks with his left hand, forcing her mouth open, as he prepared to drop a medicinal pellet into it with his right. Zhang Wuji leapt out and said, "Mr Hu, you must not harm others ... "

The man released his grip and turned around in shock. Just then, Ji Xiaofu struck him hard on the back, sending him to the ground in a crumpled heap.

The piece of black cloth fell away, revealing a pair of trimmed eyebrows and a powdered face. The intruder was actually not Hu Qingniu, but a middle-aged woman instead.

End of Chapter 12.

Definitions, explanations and/or words generally left in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters, if any, are not repeated.

1. Pulses (mai4) = another word for 'Channels' when used to label the 'Eight Extraordinary' ones.

2. Meridians (zi3 wu3) = another word for 'Channels' (jing1 mai4).

Mini Facts and Figures

People, Places, Organisations, Martial Arts, Weapons, Objects ... and other details about Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon Slaying Sabre.

People

Chang Yuchun - member of the Ming Sect and nephew-at-arms of Hu Qingniu who took Zhang Wuji to Butterfly Valley for treatment. Seriously wounded by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Ding Minjun - member of the E-mei School and elder sister-at-arms of Ji Xiaofu. More information in Chapter 11.

Ghosts of Non-Permanence (Wu2 Chang2 Gui3) - supernatural beings from Hell who were believed to drag people their doom; consisted of the White Ghost of Non-Permanence (Bai2 Wu2 Chang2) and the Black Ghost of Non-Permanence (Hei1 Wu2 Chang2).

Hu Qingniu - renowned but eccentric and temperamental physician who lived as a recluse in Butterfly Valley. Dedicated his entire life to the study of medicine and healing; could cure the most terrible of diseases and ailments; hence, became known as the 'Sage of Healing' (Yi1 Xian1). Preferred to be known as 'The One who Ignores the Dying' (Jian4 Si3 Bu4 Jiu4). A very lonely man who had grown tired of hearing praise for his unparalleled abilities as the healer of a million ailments. Prided himself in the massive body of research, discoveries and techniques that he had

accumulated in his lifetime, and was more than happy to share his best work those who could understand his heart. Unable to match Xianyu Tong in martial arts.

Ji Xiaofu - a disciple of the E-mei School; the unwed mother of Yang Buhui.

Jian Jie - elderly man who was a disciple of the Kongdong School; also known as 'The Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple (Sheng⁴ Shou³ Qie² Lan²).

Monk Peng - a member of the Ming Sect. More information in Chapter 11.

One who Ignores the Dying, The - see Hu Qingniu.

Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple, The - see Jian Jie.

Sage of Healing, The - see Hu Qingniu.

Shrewd Strategist, The - see Xianyu Tong.

Xianyu Tong - leader of the School of Mount Hua; highly skilled in martial arts, very intelligent and resourceful. Also known as 'The Shrewd Strategist' (Shen² Ji¹ Zi³).

Xie Xun - godfather of Zhang Wuji; taught the boy various methods of blocking and releasing acupoints, as well as the techniques of repositioning them.

Xue Gongyuan - disciple of Xianyu Tong from the School of Mount Hua; a swarthy man.

Yang Buhui - eight- or nine-year-old daughter of Ji Xiaofu; pretty as a picture with a pair of big and dark eyes.

Yin Liting - Zhang Wuji's sixth uncle-at-arms; fiancé of Ji Xiaofu.

Yu Daiyan - Zhang Wuji's third uncle-at-arms whom he hopes could be helped to walk without aid. More information in earlier chapters.

Zhang Sanfeng - elderly Taoist who founded the Wudang School; grandteacher of Zhang Wuji. Rich in internal

strength. More information in earlier chapters.

Zhang Wuji - twelve-year-old boy seeking medical treatment from Hu Qingniu in Butterfly Valley. Only son of the late Zhang Cuishan ??? and Yin Susu ???. Had such an amazing talent for medicine that Hu Qingniu thought he could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the great physicians Hua Tuo ?? and Bian Que ?? before the age of twenty.

Zhou Zhiruo - nine- or ten-year-old girl whom Zhang Wuji met for barely a day before he went to Butterfly Valley. More information in Chapter 11.

Places

Butterfly Valley - secluded home of Hu Qingniu; located on the shores of Nüshan Lake in Anhui Province. More information in Chapter 11.

Mount Wudang - location of the Wudang School.

Organisations

E-mei School - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; disciples include Ji Xiaofu and Ding Minjun.

Eagle Sect - sect led by Zhang Wuji's maternal grandfather, Yin Tianzheng. More information in earlier chapters.

Evil Sect - a name for the Ming Sect that was given by the renowned and upright clans. More information in earlier chapters.

Kongdong School - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; disciples include Jian Jie.

Ming Sect - sect to which Hu Qingniu and Chang Yuchun belonged; torn apart by internal strife in recent years. More information in earlier chapters.

School of Mount Hua - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; led by Xianyu Tong.

Wudang School - martial arts school founded by Zhang Sanfeng; considered by Zhang Wuji as his school of origin.

Martial Arts

Heart-Splitting Palm Technique (Jie2 Xin1 Zhang3) - the palm technique through which Chang Yuchun is gravely wounded. More information is found in Chapter 11 of the novel text.

Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness (Xuan2 Ming2 Shen2 Zhang3) - the palm technique through which Zhang Wuji is gravely wounded; produces a terribly cold and deadly toxin. Thought to be lost for such a long time that there is no one left who knows how to use it. More information in earlier chapters.

Palm Techniques, Miscellaneous (only listed, not described/used):

Red-Sand Palm Technique (Hong2 Sha1 Zhang3)

Iron-Sand Palm Technique (Tie3 Sha1 Zhang3)

Poison-Sand Palm Technique (Du2 Sha1 Zhang3)

Silken Palm Technique (Mian2 Zhang3)

Mountain-Opening Palm Technique (Kai1 Shan1 Zhang3)

Tablet-Breaking Palm Technique (Po4 Bei1 Zhang3)

Weapons

Golden Flower, The - a type of projectile that was made entirely from yellow gold in exactly the same size and shape as a real plum blossom. The handiwork was so exquisite that the bloom even had pistils that were fashioned from platinum.

Moth-Antennae Spike (e2 mei2 gang1 ci4) - a fine and delicately-curved spike (or sometimes, blade) with two pointed ends.

Medicines, Medical Treatments and Bodily Matters

Acupoints mentioned (in alphabetical order):

Chi Ze (Chi3 Ze2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Da Yuan (Da4 Yuan1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Guan Chong (Guan1 Chong1) - located on the ring-finger; part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Guan Yuan (Guan1 Yuan2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Hua Gai (Hua2 Gai4) - located on the chest; one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung. Used by Zhang Wuji in the initial treatment of Ji Xiaofu at Butterfly Valley.

Jian Jing (Jian1 Jing3) - in the abdomen; at the confluence of the three Yin Channels of the Foot and the Channel of Ren.

Jing Qu (Jing1 Qu2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Kai Yuan (Kai1 Yuan2) - located in the abdomen; one of the vital points of the body.

Kong Zui (Kong3 Zui4) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Lie Que (Lie4 Que1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Qing Leng Yuan (Qing1 Leng3 Yuan1) - located two cun (6.66 cm) above the elbow; part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Shao Shang (Shao4 Shang1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Si Zhu Kong (Si1 Zhu2 Kong1) - located in the cavity of the brow; part of the Hand

Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Tian Chi (Tian1 Chi2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Tian Fu (Tian1 Fu3) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Tian Tu (Tian1 Tu1) - in the neck; at the confluence of the Channels of Yinwei and Ren.

Wu Li (Wu3 Li3) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Wu Shu (Wu3 Shu1) - located in the confluence of the Foot Shaoyang Channel and the Dai Channel, about one-and-a-half cun (5 cm) beside the urinary tract.

Xia Bai (Xia2 Bai2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Xing Jian (Xing2 Jian1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Yin Bao (Yin1 Bao1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Yu Ji (Yu2 Ji4) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Yun Men (Yun2 Men2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Zhong Feng (Zhong1 Feng1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Zhong Fu (Zhong1 Fu3) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Zhong Ji (Zhong1 Ji2) - in the shoulder; at the confluence of the Hand Shaoyang Channel, the Foot Shaoyang Channel, the Foot Yangming Channel and the Yangwei Channel (Yang2 Wei1 Mai4).

Zhong Ting (Zhong1 Ting2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Zi Gong (Zi3 Gong1) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Eight Extraordinary Channels, The (Qi2 Jing1 Ba1 Mai4) - These consist of the channels of Ren, Du, Chong, Dai, Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao and Yangjiao. They differ from the Twelve Regular Channels in that they neither pertain to any organ, nor do they share an exterior-interior relationship between each other. Their main function is to regulate the circulation of energy (qi4) and blood in the Twelve Regular Channels. When the regular channels are satiated, excess qi and blood flow into the Eight Extraordinary Channels to be stored for later use.

Five Primary Internal Organs, The (Wu3 Zang4) - consist of the heart, lungs, spleen, liver and kidneys; considered together with the pericardium as yin elements in traditional Chinese medical practice.

Medical Books mentioned (in alphabetical order):

* A separate series of articles on the books listed below, except for those written by Hu Qingniu, will be made available soon.

Beneficial Prescriptions for Great Safety (Tai4 Ping2 Sheng4 Hui4 Fang1)

Book of Acupuncture (Jiu4 Jia3 Yi4 Jing1)

Discussion of the Dai Channel, A (Dai4 Mai4 Lun4) - written by Hu Qingniu to describe the Dai Channel and its functions, as well as to correct erroneous information in ancient medical texts, such as the Dai having ten acupoints altogether instead of four or six.

Functions of the Fourteen Channels, The (Shi2 Si4 Jing1 Fa1 Hui1)

Hua Tuo's Diagrams of the Internal Systems (Hua2 Tuo2 Nei4 Zhao1 Tu2)

Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor, The (Huang² Di⁴ Nei⁴ Jing¹)

Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians, The (Zi³ Wu³ Zhen¹ Jiu³ Jing¹)- written by Hu Qingniu as a record of all the painstaking research that he had done on acupuncture and moxibustion through the years. Consisted of twelve separate volumes; the ninth volume provided information on the treatment of injuries caused by the pugilistic arts.

Matters that are Difficult to Ascertain (Ci³ Shi⁴ Nan² Zhi¹)

Successful Acupuncture (Zhen¹ Jiu³ Da⁴ Cheng²)

Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions (Sun¹ Si¹ Miao³ Qian¹ Jin¹ Fang¹)

Thousand-Gold Book of Medical Assistance, The (Qian¹ Jin¹ Yi⁴)

Xifangzi's Book of Acupuncture (Xi¹ Fang¹ Zi³ Ming² Tang² Jiu³ Jing¹)

Wang Shuhe's Manual of Arteries and Veins (Wang² Shu¹ He² Mai⁴ Jing¹)

Wang Tao's Secrets to External Treatments (Wang² Tao¹ Wai⁴ Tai² Mi⁴ Yao⁴)

Xiama Manual of the Yellow Emperor, The (Huang² Di⁴ Xia¹ Ma¹ Jing¹)

Medicinal Flora, Fauna, Minerals and Preparations mentioned (in alphabetical order):

* A separate series of articles on the items listed below, except those marked 'fictitious', will be made available soon.

Achyranthes Root (niu² xi¹)

Bone-Piercing Fungus (tou⁴ gu³ jun¹) - fictitious.

Caper Euphorbia Seed (qian¹ jin¹ zi³)

Chinese Angelica (dang¹ gui¹)

Chinese Angelica End-Roots (gui1 wei3)
Chinese Thorowax Root (chai2 hu2)
Dahurian Angelica Root (bai2 zhi3)
Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root (fang2 feng1)
Dragon's Blood (xue4 jie2)
Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica (du2 huo2)
Frankincense (ru3 xiang1)
Gall of Bear (xiong2 dan3)
Gastrodia Tuber (tian1 ma2)
Ginseng (ren2 shen1)
Guiwei (gui1 wei3)
Lingxian (ling2 xian1)
Mole Cricket (tu2 gou3)
Multiflower Knotweed Tuber (shou3 wu1)
Myrrh (mo4 yao4)
Nanxing (nan2 xing1)
Notopterygium (qiang1 huo2)
Opificalcite (hua1 rui4 shi2)
Perilla (su1 mu4)
Pilose antlers (lu4 rong2)
Poria (fu2 ling2)
Powdered Bezoar and Rhinoceros Horn (niu2 huang2 xi1
jiao3 san3)
Powdered Toad (ge2 fen3)
Raw Fossil Fragments (sheng1 long gu3)
Rhizome of Rehmannia, Dried (sheng1 di4)
Rhubarb (da4 huang2)

Safflower (hong2 hua1)

Thin-leaved Milkwort Root (yuan3 zhi4)

Pangolin Scales (chuan1 shan1 jia3, shan1 jia3)

Taoxian (tao2 xian1)

Troglodytes (wu3 ling2 zhi4)

Typhonium Tuber (bai2 fu4 zi3)

Urine from Boys Under Twelve (tong2 bian4)

Venus-hair fern (tie3 xian4 cao3)

Prescriptions and Treatments mentioned:

For Chang Yuchun, after acupuncture, presumably to remove blood clots in his body - dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Chinese Thorowax root, Achyranthes root and the gall of bear. According to Hu Qingniu, the prescription contained errors that would eventually shorten Chang's life by forty years.

For Chang Yuchun, after the first prescription was consumed, to strengthen his body and assist in his recovery - ginseng, pilose antlers, the tuber of the multiflower knotweed and poria. According to Hu Qingniu, the prescription contained errors that would eventually shorten Chang's life by forty years.

For Jian Jie, to reduce the pain in his scalp - ten different herbs and minerals, including Nanxing, Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root, Dahurian Angelica Root, Gastrodia Tuber, Notopterygium, Typhonium Tuber and ophicalcite.

For one of the fourteen wounded men whose face was swollen red and abdomen was filled with blood clots - water, wine, pangolin scales, the end-roots of the Chinese Angelica, safflower, the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Lingxian, Dragon's Blood, Taoxian, rhubarb, frankincense and myrrh, with some urine from boys under twelve . He would pass the blood clots out after that.

For one of the men who was forced to consume live leeches - Consume honey to disintegrate the leeches.

For one of the men who had his left and right ears filled with lead and mercury respectively, and raw lacquer poured into his eyes - Pour mercury into his left ear. The pieces of lead would dissolve in the mercury and flow out of the ear. Put a gold needle into the right ear and draw the mercury out bit by bit. As for the raw lacquer, a juice made from crabs might work.

For Ji Xiaofu's poisoning - a decoction of raw fossil fragments, perilla, mole cricket, Troglodytes dung, Caper Euphorbia seed and powdered toad.

Six Secondary Organs, The (Liu⁴ Fu³) - consist of stomach, large intestines, small intestines, gall bladder, urinary bladder and the Three Visceral Cavities (San³ Jiao¹); considered as yang elements in traditional Chinese medical practice.

Twelve Regular Channels, The (Shi² Er⁴ Jing¹ Chang² Mai⁴, or Zheng⁴ Jing¹ Shi² Er⁴ Mai⁴) - a general term for the three yin and three yang channels of the hand, and the three yin and three yang channels of the foot. Each channel is related to a specific internal organ, and shares an exterior-interior relationship with one another:

The Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yin¹ Fei⁴ Jing¹).

The Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart (Shou³ Shao⁴ Yin¹ Xin¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium (Shou³ Jue² Yin¹ Xin¹ Bao¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Taiyang Channel of the Small Intestine (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yang² Xiao³ Chang² Jing¹).

The Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities (Shou³ Shao⁴ Yang² San¹ Jiao¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Yangming Channel of the Colon (Shou³ Yang² Ming² Da⁴ Chang² Jing¹).

The Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen (Zu² Tai⁴ Yin¹ Pi² Jing¹).

The Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney (Zu³ Shao⁴ Yin¹ Shen⁴ Jing¹).

The Foot Jueyin Channel of the Liver (Zu³ Jue² Yin¹ Gan¹ Jing¹).

The Foot Taiyang Channel of the Urinary Bladder (Zu³ Tai⁴ Yang² Pang² Guang¹ Jing¹).

The Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder (Zu³ Shao⁴ Yang² Dan³ Jing¹).

The Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach (Zu² Yang² Ming² Wei⁴ Jing¹).

Weights and Measures

1 chi = 1/3 metres (33.33 centimetres)

1 cun = 1/30 metres (3.33 centimetres)

1 jin = 500 grammes

1 li = 500 metres

1 liang = 0.1 jin = 50 grammes

1 qian = 0.1 liang = 5 grammes

1 qing = 100 mu = approximately 6.667 hectares

1 shichen = 2 hours

1 wen (1 copper-cash) = 0.01 liang = 0.5 grammes

1 zhang = 10/3 metres (3.33 metres)

Translation Notes

Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon-Slaying Sabre was translated by Huang Yushi with the same level of detail and comprehensiveness as Ode to Gallantry and Flying Fox of Snowy Mountain. The sheer volume of supplementary materials presented makes this a very time-consuming style; hence, it cannot be determined at this point in time whether

Yushi will continue to work on the remaining chapters of this novel.

Disclaimer

The information on traditional Chinese medicine, including but not limited to the acupoints, channels, prescriptions and medicinal flora/fauna listed in this document, is meant only to provide readers with a deeper appreciation for the extent of research and thought that Jin Yong put into the writing of Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon-Slaying Sabre. It should not be considered as medical advice. The authors and publishers of this document, including Huang Yushi, Linh Vu and wuxiapedia.com, disclaim all responsibility for any loss, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.

Chapter 13 - No Regrets for Second Chances

(Translated by Huang Yushi*, SmokeyTheBear and Qiu Shuyi)

*Courtesy of Wuxiapedia.com



The Old Woman of the Golden Flower walked over to him and reached for his wrist. After examining his pulse for a few moment, she said, "The Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness? Do you mean to say that this technique actually exists? Who struck you?"

"My attacker was disguised as a Mongolian army officer, so I do not know who he actually is," Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhang Wuji was shocked that the intruder was a woman. "Who ... who are you?" he asked as sternly as he could.

The woman did not answer him, for she had been wounded too badly by the palm technique of the E-Mei School to speak.

"Who are you?" Ji Xiaofu demanded. "Why have you harmed me time and again?"

The woman remained silent, so Ji Xiaofu pulled out her sword and placed its tip against her chest.

After a while, Zhang Wuji said, "I am going to check on Mr Hu." He was concerned that Hu Qingniu had fallen victim to the intruder too. After all, she was probably an accomplice of the Old Woman of the Golden Flower. Running over to the physician's room, he pushed the door open and shouted, "Sir, sir! Are you all right?" When no one answered him, panic set in. He quickly reached for the flint-and-steel on the table, lit a candle and saw that Hu Qingniu's blankets had been turned down. But he was not in bed or anywhere else in the room.

Zhang Wuji heaved a sigh of relief, for he had half expected to see the physician's corpse on the floor. He must have been taken away by the enemy, the boy thought. Just as he was about to dash off in pursuit, he heard heavy breathing

coming from under the bed. Bending over with the candle in hand, he found Hu Qingniu bound and gagged under the bed. Overjoyed, Zhang Wuji pulled the hapless man out immediately. He had not been able to call for help because his mouth had been stuffed with a huge walnut.

As soon as the walnut was removed from his mouth, Hu Qingniu asked, "Where is the woman?"

"She has been overpowered by Auntie Ji," answered Zhang Wuji as he began untying the physician. "She will not escape. Sir, you are not hurt, are you?"

"Do not worry about me," snapped Hu Qingniu. "Bring me the woman quickly, or it will be too late."

"Why?" asked the boy in surprise.

"Bring her to me quickly," said the physician again. "Wait, you had better take three 'Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco' (Niu Huang Xue Jie Dan / Niu² Huang² Xue³ Jie² Dan¹) with you and get her to swallow them first. The pills are in the third drawer. Hurry!" Hu Qingniu seemed so anxious that he would have rushed out himself if he was not all tied up.

Zhang Wuji knew that these 'Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco' were very effective detoxicants. Made by Hu Qingniu himself from a variety of medicinal fauna and flora, a single pill was sufficient to counter some of the deadliest poisons known to man. Therefore, the woman had probably ingested an unimaginably strong dose of poison to necessitate the use of three such pills.

Yet, he did not dare to dwell further on the issue, for Hu Qingniu was already beside himself with anxiety. Grabbing

the Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, he ran to Ji Xiaofu's shed, turned to the woman whom they had captured and said, "Swallow them quickly!"

"Get lost!" snapped the woman at once. "Who needs sympathy from a little thief like you!" Apparently, she had identified the pills as detoxicants from their smell.

"Mr Hu wants you to take them!" said Zhang Wuji.

"Go away, go away!" said the woman again, her voice becoming weaker as her injuries took their toll.

Zhang Wuji could only guess that the woman had been struck by one of Hu Qingniu's poisoned darts while tying him up earlier. Thus, the physician probably wanted to keep her alive, so that he could interrogate her on the enemy's plans. Consequently, the boy forced the three pills into the woman's mouth and down her throat. Then, he turned to Ji Xiaofu and said, "Let us hand her over to Mr Hu, and hear what he has to say."

Ji Xiaofu immobilised the woman by striking her acupoints, before leading her to Hu Qingniu's room with Zhang Wuji's help.

As soon as the three of them appeared, the physician asked, "Has she taken the pills?"

"Yes," answered Zhang Wuji.

"Very good, very good!" said Hu Qingniu in relief, as the boy cut away the ropes around his hands and feet.

Free at last, Hu Qingniu scrambled over to the woman and began examining her. After turning her eyelids to check on

her blood, he took her pulse. "How ... how did you end up with these external injuries?" he gasped in shock. "Who hit you?" He sounded both anxious and sympathetic at the same time.

The woman pouted and replied, "Ask your good disciple!"

Hu Qingniu turned to Zhang Wuji and growled, "Did you hit her?"

"She was about to ...," the boy began to answer, only to feel two tight and resounding slaps landing on his face. Golden stars danced before the boy's eyes as he struggled against the dizzying effect of these powerful and unexpected slaps.

Meanwhile, Ji Xiaofu raised her sword protectively and shouted, "What are you doing?"

Hu Qingniu ignored the sharp and gleaming blade. Instead, he turned to the wounded intruder and asked, "How does your chest feel? Does your stomach hurt?" He was so warm and attentive that he seemed completely different from the cold and calculating 'One who Ignores the Dying'. Yet, the woman did not seem to care about his concern. Undaunted, the physician released her acupoints and massaged her limbs. Then, he administered several doses of medicine, taking great care as he fed them into her mouth. Finally, he picked her up, laid her in his bed and covered her with his blankets. Such warmth and gentleness was so unfit for the enemy, that Zhang Wuji began rubbing his swollen cheeks in an absent-minded manner as he tried to make sense of the baffling scene.

The expression on Hu Qingniu's face softened further, until affection and compassion could be clearly seen all over it. "You have other injuries in addition to the poisoning," he said

to the woman in a gentle voice. "If I heal you of all these ailments, can we call off the duel for the rest of our days?"

The woman smiled and answered, "These light injuries are nothing to worry about. But do you know what poison I took? If you can really heal me of it, I will submit to you. But I am afraid that the abilities of the Sage of Healing are not necessarily as great as the prowess of the Sage of Poisons." She concluded by eyeing the physician with a coquettish smile.

Although Zhang Wuji did not understand much about the intimate relationships that could occur between a man and a woman, he could tell from the scene that the physician and the woman had a great deal of affection for each other.

"I have already declared ten years ago that the Sage of Healing is less able than the Sage of Poisons, but you have refused to believe me," Hu Qingniu went on. "Sigh, there are many ways to fight this out, but how can you use your own body to prove your point? Now, I really hope with all my heart that the Sage of Healing is better than the Sage of Poisons, or I will not carry on living any longer."

The woman smiled again and said, "If I poison other people, you will pretend to be a mediocre physician and let me gain the upperhand. Hee hee, now that I have poisoned myself, you have no alternative but to do your very best."

Hu Qingniu sighed and stroked the woman's hair. "I am very worried about you," he said. "Please do not talk anymore, for you need to close your eyes and get some rest. But if you decide to harm yourself further by exercising your internal strength in secret, you are not being fair to me at all."

"Victory and defeat must naturally be decided in a manner

that is open and aboveboard," the woman responded with a smile. "I will not act in such a despicable way." She closed her eyes as she was told, but the smile remained on her lips.

As Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji reeled in disbelief over what they had seen and heard so far, Hu Qingniu turned to the boy, bowed deeply and said, "Little Brother, I offended you greatly in a moment of haste and emotion. Please forgive me."

Zhang Wuji shot an accusatory glance at the physician and snapped, "I really do not understand a single bit of what is going on! What exactly you are doing?"

To his surprise, Hu Qingniu raised his hand and slapped himself twice across his cheeks. "Little Brother," the man said, "I owe my life to you. But I was so worried about my wife's health that I ended up offending you just now."

"She ... she is your wife?" asked Zhang Wuji in surprise.

"Yes, she is," answered Hu Qingniu with a nod. "If you are still angry, please give me another two slaps, or I will have to kowtow before you in apology. Having my life rescued is no big deal, for it is more important that my wife is saved. Now, she owes her life you as well."

The physician had always been such a strict and dignified man that Zhang Wuji regarded him with a mixture of respect and fear. Therefore, his willingness to slap himself clearly indicated the sincerity of his apology. Furthermore, the woman was really his wife. As the anger in his heart dissipated, Zhang Wuji said, "I do not dare to accept your kowtows of apology, and I am not particularly bothered by the slaps that you gave me. But I really do not understand why things have turned out this way."

Inviting Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji to sit down, Hu Qingniu replied, "I guess the truth cannot be kept hidden any longer. My wife's surname is Wang, and her maiden name is Nangu. We were originally apprentices in the same school. Besides learning martial arts from our master, I chose to focus on the study of medicine, while she decided to pursue the study of poisons. She felt that the ultimate reason for learning martial arts was to kill others. Since the art of poisoning served the same purpose, the two skills complemented each other. Being well-versed in the art of poisoning could only multiply the effectiveness of one's pugilistic skills. On the other hand, the practice medicine cures illnesses and saves lives, opposing the goal of martial arts. I admired my wife's views, for her knowledge was ten times better than mine. However, I was so bent on doing good that nothing could change my mind. As a result of my folly and the reluctance to take her advice, I neglected her loving and painstaking efforts to help me see her point.

"Our differing pursuits did not affect the good relationship we had between us, so our master eventually arranged for us to be married. As time went by, we built reputations for ourselves in the realm of the rivers and lakes. I became known as the 'Sage of Healing', while my wife was referred to as the 'Sage of Poisons'. Her skill in the art of poisoning was beyond comparison, for she was the indigo that had come out of the blue, surpassing our master by leaps and bounds. Her nickname alone testified to the extent of her abilities. Thus, I can only blame myself for acting without sufficient thought and consideration in curing her victims on several occasions. I was even singing my own praises without realising that I was being undevoted and unfaithful to my beloved wife. Such disregard was so terrible that even the phrase 'wolf's heart and dog's lungs' was insufficient to describe it. Think about it: The victims of the Sage of Poisons

were saved by the Sage of Healing. Besides going against my beloved wife's intentions, did this also not indicate that the Sage of Healing was greater than the Sage of Poisons?"

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji shook their heads quietly in their hearts, for his train of thought sounded very incorrect.

Hu Qingniu went on: "She has always been gentle, submissive, loving and devoted to me. There is no one else like her in the entire world. Yet, I carried out my selfish acts time and again, belittling my wife and putting her down by healing her victims. Finally, I realised that I had hurt her too much, so I swore an oath never to provide treatment for anyone whom she had poisoned. As time went by, my reputation as the 'One who Ignores the Dying' was established.

"She forgave me after seeing that I could change my ways. A few years later, I ran into a case of poisoning so strange that it could only be the work of my wife. So I stepped back and refused to be involved with it. Unfortunately, the victim's condition was so unique that I lost my self-control after a few days and proceeded to cure him of his ailment.

"Somehow, my wife did not kick up a fuss about it. Instead, she said, 'All right! The Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu has indeed turned out to be a marvellous physician. But I, the Sage of Poisons Wang Nangu, absolutely refuse to submit to you. Let us both pit our skills against each other, and see whether the Sage of Healing is more brilliant, or the Sage of Poisons is more formidable.' I tried my best to apologise, but how could her anger be appeased so easily? Then, I found out that she had poisoned the man not because he was her enemy, but because she had discovered a new method of poisoning that might render the victim incurable. She had executed it on the man just to test the validity of her

findings, but I had ended up spoiling her experiment with a few misguided medical techniques and a stroke of sheer good luck. I did not even show the slightest regard for my beloved wife, so how could I still be considered a man?

"For many years after that incident, she concentrated on finding new techniques of poisoning, often sending me her victims for treatment. We went on pitting our skills against each other in this manner, until I began to fail in my work. There were two reasons for this: First, there were indeed some shortcomings in my abilities, and second, I was really unwilling to anger her further. Unfortunately, my wife became more angry than before. She accused me of belittling her, allowing her to gain the upperhand without giving my best in the competition between us. Subsequently, she left Butterfly Valley in a huff and refused to return.

"Although I did not act rashly again, I found too much enjoyment in healing ailments that I could not pass up any opportunity to deal with strange illnesses or weird poisons. I knew that my wife's victims would show up time and again among my patients, but she had become so good that I could not identify her work with certainty on a number of occasions. As a result, I ended up curing her victims again. Sigh, I should be named Hu Chunniu (Stupid Cow) instead of Hu Qingniu (Black Cow). I am very fortunate that a woman like Nangu would lower herself in marriage to me, but I did not know how to love her and care for her. Instead, I made her so upset that she walked out on me in favour of a life of wandering between the skies and the cliffs, suffering the hardships of being beaten by wind and frost. Furthermore, the hearts of the people in the realm of the rivers and lakes are deceitful. How then could I rest at ease, when a fragile woman like her is living alone amidst so many wicked people?"

As remorse appeared all over Hu Qingniu's face, Ji Xiaofu cast a glance at Wang Nangu and thought: This Mrs Hu is known as the 'Sage of Poisons', for who else is better than she when it comes to the art of poisoning? People would probably be thanking the Heavens and the Earth as soon as she sat still, so who would dare to touch her in return? It is really funny that Mr Hu fears his wife as if she is a tigress.

"Thus, I swore another oath," said the physician. "Henceforth, I will not provide treatment for anyone unless he or she is a member of our Ming Cult. I did this to prevent myself from unwittingly destroying Nangu's handiwork, for both my wife and I belong to the Cult. Therefore, she would never harm any of our brothers and sisters."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji exchanged a glance: So this is the reason behind his refusal to provide treatment for anyone who is not a member of the Ming Cult.

Hu Qingniu resumed his tale: "Seven years ago, an elderly couple came to Butterfly Valley to seek treatment after falling victim to a terrible poison. Owners of Lingshe Island in the Eastern Sea, they were known by their nicknames as the Old Woman of the Golden Flower and the Old Man of the Silver Leaf. They took every care to adhere to the courtesies of making a visit, but the Old Woman ended up revealing her pugilistic prowess by accident. I was very shocked by the display. I did not dare to make an outright refusal to provide treatment, but how could I return to my old ways after recognising that those ways were wrong? Therefore, I took their pulses and said, 'Sir, you and your wife may be elderly, but your pulses move as if they belong to people in the prime of their lives. This is the first time that I have seen such an amazing condition, so credit should be given to your rich internal strength.' The Old Woman said, 'You are very brilliant.' Then, I said, 'Sir, your poison-wrought ailment is

different from your wife's. Your condition is incurable, but you will live for several more years to come. As for your wife, her poisoning is not serious, so she can treat herself with her internal strength.'

"Prodding further, I found that they had been poisoned by an old foreign monk(1) from the Western Regions, who was employed by the Mongolians. I was relieved that my wife was not involved, yet I was bound by my oath to provide treatment only for members of the Ming Cult. I could not make an exception for this couple. The Old Woman offered me a great reward, and asked me to save her husband's life. But I chose to ignore their request for the sake of my relationship with my wife. To my surprise, the elderly couple did not use any force against me, preferring to walk away in sadness. Before leaving, the Old Woman said, 'Ha ha, Ming Cult, Ming Cult ... so it is still all because of the Ming Cult!' I knew that my stand had made me many enemies, and would continue to do so for the rest of my life, but I could not allow outsiders to spoil my deep and loving relationship with my wife. Do you not think so?"

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji kept silent, unwilling to lend their support to his reason for ignoring the dying.

"Recently, my wife heard that the Old Man of the Silver Leaf had passed away," said Hu Qingniu. "As a result, the Old Woman of the Golden Flower is now on her way here to make trouble for me. My wife rushed back to stand with me against the enemy, but she found an outsider in our home. Thus, she used some medicine to knock Wuji out for one night."

Suddenly, the boy understood: I had slept all the way past noon because Mrs Hu had drugged me, and I actually thought that I was falling ill. The Sage of Poisons is formidable indeed, to work in such an undiscernable manner.

Hu Qingniu went on: "I was very happy that my wife had returned. She wanted me to pretend that I had been struck by smallpox, to avoid seeing anyone. Then, both of us stayed in the room, looking for ways and means to overcome the Old Woman of the Golden Flower. After all, she was so highly skilled that we would never be able to escape from her clutches. A few days later, Xue Gongyuan, Jian Jie, Ji-guniang and the other twelve patients arrived.

"Descriptions of your ailments told me immediately that the Old Woman of the Golden Flower wanted to test me, and see if I was really going to stick to my oath and treat no one, except for members of the Ming Cult. I enjoyed the challenge of medicine as much as life itself, so I could hardly control myself at the sight of one strange ailment. So you can just imagine how much these fifteen cases tugged at my heart. But I knew what the Old Woman was up to. As soon as I had any one of these patients cured, she would increase the torture that she had planned for me by a hundred times. Therefore, I had no choice but to stay quiet and ignore the itch in my hands, until Wuji asked me how these ailments could be healed. But I took great pains to declare that Wuji is a disciple of the Wudang Clan and that he had no relationship whatsoever with Hu Qingniu.

"Unfortunately, Nangu became upset when Wuji found success in my instructions. So, she started adding poison to the patients' food, drink and medicinal brews. This meant that she had resumed pitting her skills against mine. At the same time, she was also protecting me from the wrath of the Old Woman of the Golden Flower, for Wuji's success would probably be blamed on me. These fifteen patients were all highly skilled pugilists, so how could they not know what Nangu was doing? It turned out that she had knocked them out with drugs first, before proceeding with the main task of

poisoning them. Such prowess will probably be lost when Nangu is gone."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji exchanged another glance, for they finally understood why the boy had to shake the sleeping woman so hard before waking her up several nights ago.

"Ji-guniang has been recovering well in the past few days," Hu Qingniu added, "so Nangu's poison has not been producing the desired effect. After some investigations, my wife realised that Wuji had uncovered her secret, so she decided to harm him as well. Sigh, it is easy to transform the physical face of our land, but it is difficult to change a man's natural disposition. At the end of the day, I am still not entirely devoted to my beloved wife. I was unwilling to be involved in the first place, but after Wuji advised me to take a trip and avoid the impending doom, my heart softened. As a result, I gave him a prescription with the Chinese angelica (dang gui / dang1 gui1), the dried rhizome of rehmannia (sheng di / sheng1 di4), the root of the narrow-leaved polygala (yuan zhi / yuan3 zhi4), the root of the Saposchnikovia divaricata (fang feng / fang2 feng1) and Angelica biserrata (du huo / du2 huo2). I could not speak plainly then because my wife was with me.

"But Nangu was very intelligent. She knew the properties of each herb well, so she could tell that the prescription was too strange to be true. After some thought, she broke the code. Then, she tied me up, swallowed some poison and said, 'Shige, we have been married for more than twenty years. The oceans can dry up and the stones can break down, but the love between us will never change. Yet, you have always despised my skills, for you have always been able to cure my victims, regardless of the poison I use. Now, I have taken a deadly poison myself. If you can heal me, I will submit to you for the rest of my life.' I was so shocked that I admitted

defeat at once, and begged her not to harm herself. But she gagged me with a huge walnut. You know what took place after that."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji looked at each other, feeling exasperated and tickled at the same time. After all, this couple was so eccentric in their ways that it would probably be very difficult to find another pair like them. It was not really a big deal that Hu Qingniu loved his wife so much that he gradually became fearful of her, but it was unimaginable that Wang Nangu would be so eager to put her husband down that she ended up poisoning herself to prove her point.

"Think about it," said Hu Qingniu. "What other alternatives do I have? If I succeed in healing her, I would just be declaring that my skills are better than hers. She will be very upset. But if I fail, she will die! Sigh! I wish the Old Woman of the Golden Flower would appear soon and kill me with a stroke of her walking stick. Then, Nangu would no longer have to fret over me. Furthermore, her skills have advanced so much in recent years that I cannot figure out what poison she has ingested. So I do not even know where and how to start treating her."

"Sir, can you really not tell what poison Shimu has taken?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"Your Shimu's skills have reached the point of perfection in recent years," answered the physician. "So I am likely to fail in my attempts to heal her. She has probably ingested a deadly poison made from three pests and three weeds, but I do not have a single clue as to how these six ingredients are combined." As he spoke, he used the index finger of his right hand to write a prescription on the surface of the table. Then, he waved a hand and said, "Please go out. If Nangu dies, I will not carry on living alone."

"Please take care of yourself and do encourage Shimu with kind words," said Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji in unison.

"What should I say to encourage her?" Hu Qingniu retorted in frustration. "It is all my fault!" He burst into loud sobs after that, prompting Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji to leave the room at once.

With the two outsiders gone, Hu Qingniu struck several acupoints on his wife's back and waist. Then, he said, "Shimei, your husband is useless, for he is really unable to heal the poison wrought by the three pests and the three weeds. The only alternative left is to follow you in death, so that we can still be husband-and-wife in the afterlife." He put a hand into Wang Nangu's pocket and pulled a few small packets out. Opening one of these packets, he found that it contained a multi-coloured mixture of powders that were obtained from the grinding of three pests and three weeds.

Although Wang Nangu could not move, she could still speak. So, she said, "Shige, please ... do not take the poison ... " But Hu Qingniu turned a deaf ear to her pleas and poured the powder into his mouth. Mixing it with his saliva, he proceeded to swallow the poison.

"How can you take such a large dose at once?" cried Wang Nangu in shock. "That was enough to kill three people!"

Hu Qingniu smiled wanly and sat down on a chair beside the bed where his wife lay. Just then, he felt as if a million knives were slicing through his stomach. This was the work of the Gelsemium elegans (duan chang cao / duan4 chang2 cao3), the first of the six ingredients to take effect. The remaining two weeds and three pests would soon follow.

"Shige, there is a way to cure the poison," cried Wang Nangu.

"No ... I ... I do not believe ... I ... I am dying ...," Hu Qingniu replied as his body shook and his teeth chattered. "Take a combination of the Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe' quickly," said Wang Nangu again. "Then, use acupuncture to dissipate the poison."

"What ... purpose ... will ... it serve?" gasped Hu Qingniu in retort.

"I took only a little of the poison," answered Wang Nangu, "but you took too much. If you do not do anything now, it will be too late!"

"I have ... loved you ... with all my heart," said Hu Qingniu. "But you insisted ... on fighting with me. There is no more joy in living ... but ... when I die, everything will ... be ... over ... a-yo ... a-yo..." By then, the venom of the Pallas pit viper and the spider -- two of the three pests in the poisonous six-ingredient concoction -- had begun to attack the physician's heart and lungs. Hu Qingniu weakened until he lost consciousness altogether.

"Shige, Shige, it is all my fault!" Wang Nangu wailed loudly. "You must not die ... I will never pit my skills against yours again." Although they had fought each other for decades, the love between them had remained strong. Wang Nangu was not afraid of death, but she panicked when her husband decided to kill himself with the very same poison that she had taken. With her acupoints blocked, she could not do anything to rescue him.

Fortunately, Zhang Wuji heard her cries and rushed into the room. "Shimu, what must I do to save Shifu?" he asked, finally acknowledging himself as a student of Hu Qingniu.

Wang Nangu brightened up at once. "Give him a combination of the Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe' quickly," she answered. "Then, prick his Yong Quan and Jiu Wei acupoints with gold needles ... "

At that moment, a series of coughs sounded outside the door, appearing to be clearer than usual in the stillness of the night. Ji Xiaofu rushed into the room with a face as pale as a sheet of paper. "The Old Woman of the Golden Flower ... the Old Woman of the ...," she stammered in fright, but before she could finish her announcement, the door-curtain parted silently.

A crone with a hunched back appeared, with a young girl about twelve or thirteen years old by her side. The fearsome Old Woman of the Golden Flower had finally arrived.

Focusing her attention on Hu Qingniu, the Old Woman was taken aback to see him holding his stomach in pain. His face had darkened and his breathing was weak. In fact, he looked as if he was about to drop dead. "What is wrong with him?" she asked.

Before anyone could answer her, Hu Qingniu's legs stiffened. He was finally dead.

"Why did you punish yourself in this manner?" wailed Wang Nangu. "Why did you poison yourself to death?"

The Old Woman of the Golden Flower had travelled all the way to the Central Region from the Isle of the Gifted Snake for two purposes: to seek redress from the enemy who had caused the death of her husband, and to terrorise Hu Qingniu. Yet, she had not expected the physician to ingest a

deadly poison just before she showed up. As an expert on poisons herself, she could tell from the colour on the faces of Hu Qingniu and Wang Nangu that both of them had been so seriously poisoned that there was no longer a cure for either one of them. Since the physician had probably committed suicide in fear of the Old Woman herself, she quickly decided that the objective of her visit had been accomplished. "He has sinned, he has sinned!" she mumbled with a sigh as she walked out of the room with the young girl in tow.

Moments after leaving the hut, her coughs were heard coming from a distance of more than ten zhang (33.33 metres) away. The speed at which she moved was really beyond imagination. Feeling safe once more, Zhang Wuji placed a hand on Hu Qingniu's chest. His heart was still beating, but its pace had become very faint. The boy quickly fed the man a Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and a dose of the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe'. Then, he pushed a gold needle each into his Yong Quan and Jiu Wei acupoints, before giving Wang Nangu the same course of treatment.

More than an hour later, Hu Qingniu regained consciousness. Wang Nangu was so happy that she burst into tears. "Little Brother, thank you so much for saving our lives," she said to Zhang Wuji between sobs. Then, she wrote up a prescription that would expel the remaining poison from their bodies.

Unfortunately, her skills at detoxification were not particularly brilliant, so her prescription could not remove the poison in its entirety. When Zhang Wuji took the prescription away for decoction, he quietly substituted some of its contents with what Hu Qingniu had written earlier on the surface of the table. However, Wang Nangu was never told about it.

"With the Old Woman of the Golden Flower thinking that Mr

Hu has poisoned himself to death, one big problem has been solved," Zhang Wuji declared. But the thought of the crone and the ghost-like manner in which she appeared and disappeared was still frightening enough to send shivers down his spine.

"People say that this Old Woman of the Golden Flower is very cautious in her ways," Wang Nangu remarked. "Although she has gone, she will return again to check on us. My husband and I must leave this place immediately. Little Brother, please erect two graves for us, with our names clearly inscribed on the gravestones."

Zhang Wuji agreed.

After Hu Qingniu and his wife had drunk their detoxifying decoctions, they packed the things hurriedly. Then, they sent the two pages back to their respective homes with ten liang (500 grams) of silver each. Finally, the couple hopped on to a mule-drawn carriage and vanished under the cover of night.

Zhang Wuji sent them all the way up to the entrance of Butterfly Valley. Having spent the past two years in each other's company, neither the boy nor the physician could bear to part with the other.

Hu Qingniu pulled out a handwritten book and said, "Wuji, all the things that I have learnt about medicine and its practices are recorded in this book. I have kept it hidden from you in the past, but now, I would like you to have it. I feel very bad for failing to expel the toxins of the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness (Xuan Ming Shen Zhang / Xuan² Ming² Shen² Zhang³) from your body, so I hope that you will eventually find a way to do so by studying this book."

Zhang Wuji accepted the gift with thanks.

Then, Wang Nangu said, "You saved our lives and enabled us to be reconciled with each other. Thus, I should pass all my knowledge and skills to you as well. But I have focused only on the methods of harming others with poison, so there is little purpose in your learning them. I hope that you will achieve complete recovery as soon as possible. As for your reward, I will have to make up for it in the days to come."

Zhang Wuji waited until the mule-drawn carriage had disappeared from sight before returning to the row of huts. Early the next morning, he built two graves beside the huts by piling earth and stones. Then, he left the valley to engage the services of a stonemason. The stonemason erected two gravestones: one inscribed with 'The grave of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu' and the other with 'The grave of Mrs Hu, nee Wang'.

Jian Jie and the others sighed when they saw the graves, for the story of Hu Qingniu being seriously ill had proven to be true.

With Wang Nangu gone, there was no one left to poison the patients in secret. Consequently, their injuries began to heal under Zhang Wuji's care. Less than ten days later, they took their leave with thanks. Ji Xiaofu and her daughter did not have anywhere to go to, so they decided to accompany Zhang Wuji for a few more days.

Notes:

In the 2nd edition, the culprit was a "mute medicant monk".

(Translated by SmokeyTheBear)

In these few days, Zhang Wuji spent all his effort reading the medical book that Hu Qingniu had written, and discovered that the contents were deep and profound, a worthy work of

the “Deity of Healing”. He only read it for about eight or nine days and his medical skills improved greatly, but as to the eradication of the “Yin” poison in his body, there wasn’t the slightest clue. He flipped through and read many pages, finally gave up hope, and thought, “If Hu Qingniu knew a method to cure me, how would he not do so? If he did not, how would the medical book have a method?” After thinking of this, he could not help feeling completely disheartened. He closed the book, walked outside the house, saw the two false graves, and thought, “Before a year passes, I will really be buried under the ground. What will my tombstone say?” While he was lost in thought, suddenly he heard a few coughs from behind, Zhang Wuji was surprised and turned his head, only to see the Golden Flower Granny holding the beautiful looking little girl, standing unsteadily a few ‘zhang’ away. (1 ‘zhang’=10 feet) The Golden Flower Granny asked, “Little one, who are you to Hu Qingniu? Why are you sighing here?” Zhang Wuji replied, “My body is afflicted with ‘Yin’ poison from the Xuanming Divine Palm.....” The Golden Flower Granny walked to him, held his wrist, and felt his pulse, exclaiming, “Xuanming Divine Palm? Such a skill really exists in this world? Who was the one who hit you?” Zhang Wuji replied, “That man assumed the guise of a Mongolian military officer, but I do not know who he actually is. I came to seek treatment from Mr. Hu, he said I was not one of the Ming Cult, he would not heal me. Now that he has died from ingesting poison, my illness cannot be cured, so I felt sad thinking about this.”

The Golden Flower Granny saw that he was handsome and refined, very likeable, yet was afflicted with this untreatable illness, then said, "A pity, a pity!" Three lines suddenly surged forth from Zhang Wuji's heart, "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□?"*

*Explanation to follow

These three lines come from 'Zhuangzi'. Zhang Sanfeng practiced Taoism. Although his seven disciples were not priests, but they studied this Taoist-venerated book 'Zhuangzi Nanhua Jing' very thoroughly. When Zhang Wuji reached five years of age on Fire and Ice Island, Zhang Cuishan taught him to read and write. Though the lack of books limited them to writing on the ground, he was taught to memorise the 'Zhuangzi'. These four lines mean, "The span of life, how can it forced? How would I know, if wanting to live was a mistake? How would I know, if man's fear of death, was not like wandering outside during youth not knowing to return to his hometown? How would I know, if dead people would not regret previously seeking to live?" Zhuangzi's original meaning expounded that, life might not be bliss, death might not be suffering, life and death are actually no different, a living person is only "having a big dream", and after dying is "greatly awakened", and maybe after dying would feel that the previous time in life was stupid, why not die earlier? Just like after having a sad and terrifying nightmare, once awakened, would realise this annoying nightmare had simply went on for too long. Zhang Wuji was young and originally did not know these truths about life, but in these four years he had been between hovering between life and death, unavoidably experiencing the hidden meaning in Zhuangzi's words. Originally he did not believe Zhuangzi's words, but since his days were numbered, he hoped that after death there would be a wondrous change, making his days of struggling to live laughable. At this time, he heard the Golden Flower Granny's repeated "a pity", and laughed lightly, saying those three lines from the 'Zhuangzi' without thinking. The Golden Flower Granny asked, "What does that mean?" Zhang Wuji explained it once and the Golden Flower Granny was immediately stupefied.

*'Zhuangzi' is a book on Taoist philosophy written by an

author of the same name. Whenever quotes are used i.e. 'Zhuangzi' it refers to the book, and without quotes it refers to Zhuangzi the person/author. For more information, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi>

She thought of her deceased husband from these few lines. The two of them were husband and wife for ten years and were incomparably loving, once separated by 'yin' and 'yang' (i.e. life and death), no longer having a chance to meet, if one was to live on it was like wandering destitution in a foreign land. On the contrary death would be a return to native land, so when the enemy had poisoned her husband, Hu Qingniu's refusal to treat him was not necessarily a bad thing. "Native land? Native land? But after returning to the native land, would it really be better than the foreign land?"

However the little girl standing beside the Golden Flower Granny did not understand these few lines of Zhang Wuji's at all, not knowing why once the granny heard them, had become still as if she was crazy. Her pair of beautiful eyes looked at the granny, then looked at Zhang Wuji, shifting from the two's faces back and forth. Finally, the Golden Flower Granny took a breath, and said, "Matters of the nether realm, cannot be ascertained. Although death might not be frightening, but no mortal will not die, at the end of this life, it is difficult to escape that day. To be able to live one more day, is one day more!"

Zhang Wuji, having seen Ji Xiaofu and the fifteen others cruelly wounded by the Golden Flower Granny and also the dread of the Hu Qingniu couple towards her, did not even have the courage to run away. He thought that this Golden Flower Granny was an extremely brutal person, but on meeting her it seemed otherwise. That day he caught a glance of her under the light and did not get a clear look. At this moment he saw that she was clearly a kind and gentle

old granny. Although her face was hard and stiff, full of wrinkles and totally devoid of feeling, but her eyes were sparkling clear, with the liveliness of a young woman, and displayed warmth and kindness.

The Golden Flower Granny asked again, "Child, what is the respected name of your father?" Zhang Wuji answered, "My father's surname is Zhang, first name Cui second name Shan, a Wudang disciple." But he did not mention his father's suicide.

The Golden Flower Granny was shocked, and said, "You are the son of Wudang's Fifth Hero Zhang, does that mean that evil person who used 'Xuanming' Divine Palm to hurt you was for the whereabouts of the Golden-Mane Lion King and the Dragon-Slaying Sabre?" Zhang Wuji replied, "Correct, he inflicted all kinds of torture on me, but I would rather die than say it." The Golden Flower Granny said, "You really know it?" Zhang Wuji answered, "En, the Golden-Mane Lion King is my godfather, I absolutely would not reveal it." The Golden Flower Granny's left hand shot forth and captured his hands with her palm. Only to hear his joints making a "ge, ge" sound, Zhang Wuji's hands were so painful that he also fainted, he felt a bone-penetrating chill of cold 'qi' transmitted from his hands to his chest, this cold 'qi' was different from 'Xuanming' Divine Palm, but it had the same unbearable feeling. The Golden Flower Granny said gently, "Obedient child, good child, tell of Xie Xun's whereabouts, granny will cure your cold poison, and pass on a set of invincible martial arts to you." Zhang Wuji was in tears from the pain, fearlessly replying, "My parents would rather give up their lives, than reveal the location of a friend. Golden Flower Granny, you look upon me as one who would betray his parents?" The Golden Flower Granny smiled and replied, "Very good, very good! Your father? Is he here?" The transmission stopped and the iron-like fingers that gripped

his hands loosened. Zhang Wuji said loudly, "Why don't you pour mercury into my ears? Why not force me to swallow metal needles, swallow leeches? Four years ago when I was only a child, I was already unafraid of all kinds of torture from those evil people, now that I am grown up, could it be that I have degenerated?" The Golden Flower Granny laughed loudly "haha", and said, "You think you are an adult, not a child anymore, haha, haha....." She laughed a few times and released Zhang Wuji's hands, only to see that the wrists of his hands to his fingertips, had turned a purplish-black colour.

That little girl shot him a meaningful glance, and said, "Quickly thank Granny for her mercy in sparing your life." Zhang Wuji gave a "heng", saying, "If she killed me, maybe I would be a little happier, what is there to thank?" That little girl wrinkled her brows, replying angrily, "You are disobedient, I am going to ignore you!" Saying this she turned away, but surreptitiously peeped at him to see what he was doing. The Golden Flower Granny laughed loudly, "Ah Li, you were alone on the island, without a young companion, it must have been lonely!" Let us capture this little child and tell him to serve you, how about that? The only thing is he has the temper of a donkey, being too stubborn and not very obedient." That little girl's long eyebrows raised, she clapped and laughed, "Wonderful, let us capture him then! If he is disobedient, won't Granny think of a way to control him?" Zhang Wuji was hearing the two of them going back and forth, and became very anxious. If the Golden Flower Granny was to kill him on the spot, that would be fine, but if he were to be captured and brought to some island, to suffer the two's torture and be half-alive or half-dead, it would be more unbearable than anything else.

The Golden Flower Granny nodded, "Follow me, first we have to find someone, accomplish a task, then go back to Lingshe

(Spirit Snake) Island.” Zhang Wuji said, “You are not a good person, I will not accompany you.” The Golden Flower Granny smiled, “Our Lingshe Island has everything, things to eat and play, you have not even seen them before. Obedient child, come follow Granny.” Zhang Wuji suddenly turned around and ran away quickly, who knows as soon as he took a step, the Golden Flower Granny was in front of him again, and said gently, “Child, you will not be able to escape, come follow us obediently.” Zhang Wuji gritted his teeth and sent a fierce palm towards her, the Golden Flower Granny turned sideways and blew a breath towards his palm. Zhang Wuji’s palm had already been made black and swollen by her, now that this breath came it was like using a sharp knife to cut into a wound, being so painful that he leapt up.

All of a sudden a girl’s voice could be heard, “Brother Wuji, what are you playing? I’m coming as well.” It was precisely Yang Buhui that had come, followed by Ji Xiaofu who emerged from behind the trees and walked over. The mother and daughter duo had just strolled back from the field, unexpectedly seeing the Golden Flower Granny, Ji Xiaofu’s face paled. Finally gathering her courage, she said tremblingly, “Granny, you cannot trouble children?” The Golden Flower Granny stared fixedly at Ji Xiaofu, and laughed coldly, “You are not dead yet? This old granny’s affairs, need you to chatter about as well? Come over here to let me take a look, why have you not died to this day?”

Ji Xiaofu came from a martial family, was a high disciple of a famous school, and was originally very courageous, but now she took her daughter into consideration and did not dare to get into danger. Clutching her daughter’s hand she retreated a step instead, and said quietly, “Wuji, come over.”

Zhang Wuji felt like going over. That little girl Ah Li turned her palm over and caught the ‘San Yang Luo’ on his shoulder,

and said, "Hold it there! You are called Wuji, surnamed Zhang, you are Zhang Wuji, is that it?" Once this 'San Yang Luo' was clasped, half of Zhang Wuji's body immediately became numb and weak rendering him immobile. He was shocked and angry, and shouted, "Release me quickly!" Suddenly a crisp and clear female voice was heard, "Xiaofu, how can you be so useless? Go over if you want to!" Ji Xiaofu was shocked but happy, turned around and said, "Master!", but there was no trace of anyone behind her. She looked carefully, only then did she see a grey-robed nun slowly walking over from a distance away, precisely the headmaster of Emei, her master Mijue Shitai*. Following behind her were two disciples, one was her elder martial-sister Ding Minjun, one was her younger martial-sister Bei Jinyi. The Golden Flower Granny saw that she was so far away that even her face could not be seen clearly, yet her voice was transmitted to everyone's ears as though she was very close, which was sufficient proof of her profound internal energy. Mijue Shitai was very well-known, everyone in the martial world had heard of her, only that she rarely left the mountain and not many people had met her personally. As she came nearer, it could be seen that she was about forty-four to forty-five years of age and her features could be considered beautiful, but her two eyebrows arched downwards, her appearance was strange, and resembled the 'Lu Si' ghost from stage a little. Ji Xiaofu went to kneel down and kowtowed to her, and greeted quietly, "Master, you are well." Mijue Shitai replied, "You have not angered me to death, I can still be considered well." Ji Xiaofu continued kneeling and did not dare to get up. But hearing the cold laughs from Ding Minjun standing behind her master, as if she had said numerous bad things about herself to their master, she could not help breaking out in cold sweat. Mijue Shitai said icily, "This granny told you to go over and let her take a look as to why you have not died to this day. You go over and let her take a look."

*Shitai is a term of address used for senior nuns or priestesses. E.g. In Smiling Proud Wanderer the three senior Hengshan leaders are Shitai (senior Buddhist nuns), in Return of the Condor Heroes Priestess Shenying is also a Shitai (senior Taoist priestess).

Ji Xiaofu answered, "Yes." Standing up, she strode up to the Golden Flower Granny, and said in a clear voice, "Golden Flower Granny, my master is here. Your fierce and overbearing manner should be ended." The Golden Flower Granny coughed, stared fixedly at Mijue Shitai, nodded, and said, "En, you are the Emei headmaster, I hit your disciple, what will you do?" Mijue Shitai replied icily, "Well hit! If you like to hit her, hit her again, even if you kill her it is none of my business." Ji Xiaofu felt as if a knife had pierced her heart, and called out, "Master!" Two streams of warm tears flowed. She knew her master was always extremely protective of her disciples. When her disciples had crossed anyone, even if it went against her principles she would argue vehemently to protect them. Now that she said these words she clearly did not regard her as a disciple any longer. The Golden Flower Granny said, "I do not have any enmity with Emei, having hit her once, it is enough. Ah Li, let us leave!" Saying that she slowly turned away.

Ding Minjun did not know the Golden Flower Granny's background, only that she looked senile and sickly but dared to be so insolent towards her master. She became angry, stepped up quickly and obstructed her, exclaiming, "You did not apologise to my master and are thinking of leaving?" Saying that her right hand drew her sword, half-unsheathed, to intimidate the granny.

The Golden Flower Granny suddenly extended two fingers and gently pinched on her sword sheath, then released it quickly, laughing, "Scrap metal, can also be used to scare

people?” Ding Minjun became even angrier and wanted to unsheathe her sword. Unexpectedly her single pull was not able to pull out the sword. Ah Li laughed, “Scrap metal, it has become rusty!”

Ding Minjun tried again with all her might, but was still unable to pull it out. Only then did she know that the Golden Flower Granny’s seemingly causal pinch on her sword sheath before, had secretly utilised her internal energy to make an indent into the sword sheath, making it grip the blade of the sword firmly. Ding Minjun could not unsheathe it even if she wanted to but she was unwilling to leave it at that. Her face reddened and her expression was wretched.

Miejue Shitai walked up slowly, held the sword hilt with three fingers and shook gently. The sword sheath immediately cracked into two, freeing the sword blade. She said, “This sword is not any sharp or precious blade, but neither is it scrap metal. Golden Flower Granny, why do you not enjoy life on Lingshe Island, but come to the central plains to make trouble?”

The Golden Flower Granny saw the way that she used her three fingers to shake the sword and break the sheath. She felt a pang of fear, and said to herself, “This bothersome nun is renowned, she truly possesses some real skill.” All smiles, she said, “My husband passed away, I was alone on the island and felt bored. So I left and wandered around, to see if I could find any suitable monk or priest to be my companion.” She emphasised “monk or priest” to ridicule the other as being a nun, yet was also wandering about. Miejue Shitai’s pair of drooped eyebrows hung even lower, she raised the sword and said in a bleak voice, “Show your weapon!” Since coming under her tutelage, Ding Minjun, Ji Xiaofu and the others had never seen their master fight with anyone. Ji Xiaofu was especially concerned as she knew that

the Golden Flower Granny's martial arts were extraordinary and inscrutable. Zhang Wuji's shoulder was still being held by Ah Li and his upper body was becoming increasingly numb, he shouted, "Let go of me quickly! Why are you grabbing on to me?" Ah Li saw Ji Xiaofu at the side with the intention to step in. If she did not let him go, Ji Xiaofu would definitely come to intervene and by then she would have to release him anyway. Hence she exerted her strength and flung him away, releasing his shoulder, and said coldly, "Let us see whether you can escape?" The Golden Flower Granny gave a slight smile, and said, "Years ago Emei Sect's Guo Xiang Heroine Guo's sword skill was renowned throughout the land. It must have been extremely high, but I wonder how much of it has been passed down to the descendants?" Miejue Shitai replied strongly, "Even if only a fraction remains it is enough to annihilate the evil and unorthodox." The Golden Flower Granny stared fixedly on the tip of her opponent's sword unblinkingly. All of a sudden, she raised her walking staff and thrust it fiercely towards the sword. Miejue Shitai's sword quivered and stabbed towards her shoulder. Amidst her coughing, the Golden Flower Granny swept her staff across. Miejue Shitai followed her sword, moving behind her opponent in a flash. Before her steps ended her sword move had arrived. However the Golden Flower Granny did not turn around but instead twirled her walking staff and sent a backhand smash towards the sword blade. The two of them had exchanged three to four moves and were already praising each other's ability silently. An abrupt 'dang' sound was heard as the sword Miejue Shitai was wielding broke into two. When the sword and staff met the sword was broken by the impact of the walking staff. The onlookers were all shocked except for Ah Li. The Golden Flower Granny's walking staff was dark, yellowish and dirty. It appeared very ordinary and seemed to be neither gold nor iron. Yet it could shatter a sharp sword, so it must be the force of her profound and abundant internal energy.

However, when the Golden Flower Granny clashed weapons with Mijue Shitai she knew that the sword broke because of the sharpness of her weapon and not because her own internal energy had improved. Her walking staff was actually a special product of the seabed near Lingshe Island. It was called 'Gold Coral' and was made from a blend of various kinds of quality gold combined with coral, formed by undergoing thousands of years deep in the sea. It could shear metal like cutting tofu and strike rocks like hitting cotton. Any kind of sharp weapon would break immediately upon contact. Nevertheless the Golden Flower Granny did not press her attack. She only propped her staff against the ground and pat her chest, coughing. The three Emei disciples Ji Xiaofu, Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi feared that their master was injured. In unison they rushed to Mijue Shitai's side to guard her.

(Translated by dgfds01)

Ah Li turned her palm and grabbed Zhang Wuji's wrist. Laughing, she said: "I said you won't be able to escape. Isn't that true?" This was totally unexpected. Before Zhang Wuji could break free, his meridians were obstructed and lost the strength in his body. This was the second time she had beaten him. Feeling both embarrassed and indignant, both angry and anxious, he kicked out at her waist with his right foot. Ah Li's fingers held firm and Zhang Wuji's foot had traveled no more than half a chi (about a foot) when it lost the strength to continue. He yelled angrily: "Are you going to let me go?" Ah Li laughed: "If I don't let you go, what can you do?" Zhang Wuji suddenly bent down and bit hard into her arm. Ah Li felt the pain and screamed: "Ai yo!" She loosened her right hand's grip while her left hand clawed at Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji jumped back quickly but he was too slow. Ah Li's fingers had scratched the right side of his face causing it to bleed. Ah Li's bitten right arm was bleeding even more. The pain was so great that she wanted to cry.

While the two children were fighting, Golden Flower Granny (Jinhua Popo) did not even glance at them. Miejue Shitai threw aside her broken sword and said: "This is my disciple's weapon, not suitable for fighting against top experts." So saying, she untied her knapsack and took out an antique long sword about four feet in length. Granny Golden Flower saw that a green-tinged aura was emitting from the scabbard. The sword had not yet been drawn but she could see it was something out of the ordinary. She then saw the words 'Yi Tian' (roughly translated as 'supporting heaven' but I'll stick with simply 'Heaven' to be consistent with the title) inlaid in gold on the scabbard. Shocked, she blurted out: "The Heaven Sword!" Miejue Shitai nodded her head and said: "Correct, this is the Heaven Sword. Granny Golden Flower's mind flashed to the well-known phrases resounding over the Wulin: "Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?" She muttered repeatedly to herself: "So the Heaven Sword has fallen into Emei's hands."

Miejue Shitai shouted: "En garde!" Without removing the scabbard, she grasped the hilt and pointed the sword at Granny Golden Flower's chest. Granny Golden Flower flipped her staff round to meet her. Miejue Shitai's wrist moved slightly and the sword met the staff. With a light 'chi' sound, Granny Golden Flower's precious 'Gold Coral' staff was cut into two as easily as a piece of paper.

Granny Golden Flower was shaken. She thought: "The Heaven Sword has not even been drawn out of its scabbard, and yet it is already so formidable. It truly lives up to its reputation." She gazed at the sword and asked: "Miejue Shitai, please let me see what the sword looks like."

Miejue Shitai shook her head and said coldly: "Once this sword leaves its scabbard, it will not return without first tasting blood."

The two women stared at each other, neither speaking for a long while.

By this time, Granny Golden Flower knew that this nun's kungfu was not below hers. Miejue had not yet displayed her top skills but as the head of Emei, she would definitely be quite formidable. Added to that, she had in her hand the "Number 1 Sword under Heaven". Granny Golden Flower did not feel able to take her on. She coughed softly twice, then turned around, grabbed Ah Li's hand and walked away. Ah Li turned her head and shouted: "Zhang Wuji, Zhang Wuji!" Her voice grew softer and softer as the distance increased, until finally it could be heard no more.

Ding Minjun, Ji Xiaofu, and Bei Jinyi were overjoyed that their shifu had won and her powerful opponent had run away. Ding Minjun said: "Shifu, that old woman is no Mt Tai, is she? Yet she even dared to fight with you, she truly got what she deserved." Miejue Shitai said: "When you roam the jianghu in the future, if you ever hear her cough, make sure you run far away." Earlier when she struck out with her sword, it was backed with the power of her thirty years worth of cultivation of "Emei's 9 Yang Divine Skill". Even though she succeeded in breaking her opponent's staff, when her internal energy came into contact with Granny Golden Flower's body, it was as if it had fallen into a vast ocean and left no trace of itself behind. The force only managed to cause Granny's clothing to flap while her footing remained firm. Now that she thought about it, her heart shivered with fear. She thought that the Granny's inner power was strong and powerful while her body was strong and healthy, definitely not like that of an old lady in her twilight years. It was difficult to understand how

this could be so. Miejue Shitai raised her head to stare at the sky, then after a while she called: "Xiaofu, come here!" Without even glancing at her, she walked into the house. Ji Xiaofu and the other two followed her inside. Yang Buhui called out: "Mama!" and tried to go inside too.

Ji Xiaofu knew that her shifu had left Emei with the purpose of 'cleaning out the home' (i.e. dealing with a renegade disciple). Though she had previously been the object of love and attention, her shifu was very strict, so she really did not know how she would be dealt with. She told her daughter: "You should stay outside and play, don't come inside."

Zhang Wuji thought: "The Ding woman is really bad. She will definitely bad-mouth Auntie Ji in front of their shifu. I saw clearly what happened that night, she's venomous and cruel. If she talks rubbish now and confuses the truth, I will come out and help Auntie Ji." He quietly went to the back of the house, crouched under a window, held his breath and listened. But inside the house was totally silent, nobody was talking.

After a while, Miejue Shitai said: "Xiaofu, it is your story so you can tell me what happened." Ji Xiaofu choked out: "Shifu, I... I..." Miejue Shitai said: "Minjun, come and question her." Ding Minjun said: "Yes. Martial sister Ji, of our sect's forbidden practices, what is the third?" Ji Xiaofu replied: "Taking part in lewd and lecherous activities." Ding Minjun said: "Correct. What then, is the sixth?" Ji Xiaofu replied: "Turning your heart to outsiders, rebelling against sect and master." Again, Ding Minjun asked: "And how do we deal with people who break these rules?" Ji Xiaofu did not reply. Instead, she turned to Miejue Shitai, saying: "Shifu, there is something that I have difficulty saying. It is not as simple as what Martial Sister Ding is saying." Miejue Shitai said: "Alright, there are no outsiders here. Tell me

everything.”

Ji Xiaofu knew that this was a very important moment, she didn't dare conceal anything. She said: “Shifu, that year after we found out about the Heavenly Eagle Cult gathering at Wangpan Shan, you ordered me and 15 other martial sisters to leave the mountain and split up to look for the Golden-hair Lion King Xie Xun. I went west towards Sichuan. On the way, I met a middle-aged man dressed in white. He was around 40 years old. Everywhere I went, he followed. When I stayed at an inn, he stayed there as well. When I moved on, he moved on as well. At first I just ignored him. After that, I told him off because it was unseemly. That man talked like a madman, so I lost my patience, took out my sword and stabbed at him. He had no weapon but his kungfu was amazing. Within 3 moves, he had snatched the sword from my hand. I was frightened and tried to run away. He didn't chase me. Early morning the second day, I woke up in my inn room only to see my sword next to my pillow. I was greatly frightened. When I left the inn, that man started following me again. There was no point in me fighting him again, so I tried begging him. I said that we are neither related nor are we enemies, we don't know each other, plus men and women should remain apart, there is no point in you following me around. I also said, although my kungfu is not your match, you shouldn't provoke our Emei Sect.” Meijue Shitai ‘hmmphed’ as if she agreed. Ji Xiaofu continued: “That man laughed and laughed, then said: ‘Once a person's kungfu is split into different sects, it deteriorates a lot. If you are willing to follow me, you'll acquire a new set of eyes and ears. I'll teach you the greatest kungfu on earth.’”

Miejue Shitai has eccentric in nature. Her whole life had been devoted to martial arts to the exclusion of other matters (Note: I think there's a mistake in the online text I'm using, so this bit is a guess). On hearing what that man said, she

said: "You should have followed him to have a look and see what sort of weird skills he has." Ji Xiaofu blushed bright red and replied: "Shifu, he is a strange man, how could I follow him?" Miejue Shitai then came to her senses: "Ah, you're right! So you told him to get lost?" Ji Xiaofu said: "I tried time and time again to avoid him, but I just couldn't lose him. Ai, I was unfortunate to run into this, the consequence of my sins in my previous life..." As she said this, her voice grew softer and softer.

Miejue Shitai asked: "What happened after that?"

Ji Xiaofu answered softly: "I couldn't resist and lost my chastity to him. He had complete control over me, I couldn't even end my life. This went on for a few months. Then one day, an enemy suddenly came looking for him and I took this opportunity to escape. Not long later, I discovered that I was pregnant. I didn't dare tell you, Shifu, so I hid away and gave birth to my child in secret."

Miejue Shitai asked: "Are you telling me the truth?" Ji Xiaofu said: "I would never dare to lie to you, Shifu." Miejue Shitai gave a low hum and said: "My poor child. Ai, this matter really wasn't your fault!" When Ding Minjun heard her Shifu's sympathy, she could not help but glare fiercely at Ji Xiaofu. Miejue Shitai sighed and asked: "Then what are your plans now?" Ji Xiaofu tearfully answered: "The arrangements my family made for me to marry Wudang's Sixth Master have fallen apart. I beg Shifu to permit me to cut my hair and become a nun." Miejue Shitai shook her head: "That won't be good. Humph, what is the name of the evil man who harmed you?" Ji Xiaofu lowered her head and answered: "His... his surname is Yang, and his given name is Xiao." Miejue Shitai suddenly leapt up. She waved her sleeve and with a 'krack' sound, the table collapsed into two pieces. Zhang Wuji who was eavesdropping outside was greatly frightened. Even the

expressions of Ji Xiaofu, Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi changed. Miejue Shitai yelled: "You said that he is Yang Xiao? The biggest demon of the Demon Cult, the man called the 'Left Emissary of Guang Ming' Yang Xiao?"

Ji Xiaofu replied: "He... he... is from the Ming Cult and seemed to hold some position within it." Miejue Shitai, with a furious expression on her face, said: "What Ming Cult? The Demon Cult is ferocious and inhuman, there are no evil deeds that they do not do. (Note: 'Ming' means 'bright' which implies good, as opposed to evil.) Where... where is he hiding now? Is he at Guang Ming Peak in the Kunlun Mountains? I'm going to look for him." Ji Xiaofu said: "He said he is the Ming Cult's..." Miejue Shitai shouted: "Demon Cult!" Ji Xiaofu said: "Yes. He said he is the Demon Cult's leader. Ordinarily, he would be at Guang Ming Peak but the last few years, there has been internal discord and fighting within the Cult. So he no longer lives on Guang Ming Peak to prevent people from thinking he wants to be the Cult Leader. He is now secretly living in Zuo Feng Summit of the Kunlun Mountains. This was something he only told me, no one else in the Jianghu knows about it. Since Shifu asked me, I dare not refuse to answer. Shifu, this man... is this man our sects's enemy?" Miejue Shitai answered: "Our enmity is as deep as the ocean! Your Eldest Martial Uncle Guhong Zi was angered to death by the great demon Yang Xiao."

Ji Xiaofu was very frightened, yet she couldn't help but feeling proud. Her Eldest Martial Uncle Guhong Zi was a top expert in the world but even he was angered to death by "him". She wanted to ask about the details but did not dare open her mouth.

Miejue Shitai lifted her face to the sky, with great hatred she muttered to herself: "Yang Xiao... for many years I had no idea of your whereabouts, now that you've fallen into my

hands...” She suddenly spun around and said: “Right, you lost your chastity to him, defended Monk Peng, offended your Martial Sister Ding, concealed the truth from me, and secretly gave birth to a child... I’ll forget about all this. I want you to do something for me, when you’ve rendered this great service come back to Emei. I will give you the robes, alms bowl and Yi Tian sword, and then make you my successor as the our Sect Leader.” These words shocked everyone. Ding Minjun’s jealousy and hatred burst forward. She was furious with their Shifu for not understanding right and wrong, and acting unreasonably.

Ji Xiaofu said: “Whatever Shifu orders, I will do my utmost to complete. But I have too many faults and my martial arts are not good, so I dare not even dream of accepting your legacy. Miejue Shitai said: “Come with me.” She pulled Ji Xiaofu’s wrist and flew out of the house to the hill on the left side of the valley. She only stopped when they reached a deserted spot. Zhang Wuji observed them from far away. He then saw Miejue Shitai stand at a tall vantage point and gaze round in all four directions, before pulling Ji Xiaofu to her side and speaking softly into her ear. Only then did he realise that what she was saying was a big secret. Not only was she afraid of eavesdroppers, but she also did not even want her two disciples, Ding and Bei, to hear what she said.

After hiding next to the house, Zhang Wuji did not dare reveal himself. From afar, he watched Miejue Shitai say something and Ji Xiaofu lower her head in thought before finally shaking her head firmly. He then saw Miejue Shitai lift up her right palm and struck down, only to stop halfway like she was giving Ji a last chance to change her mind. Zhang Wuji’s heart was beating rapidly. He thought that if this palm fell on her head, she would definitely die. He gazed intently at Ji Xiaofu without blinking an eye. He saw her drop to her knees and shake her head. Miejue Shitai’s palm fell squarely

on her forehead, Ji Xiaofu's body swayed and dropped to the ground. She writhed a little and then stopped moving.

Zhang Wuji was both frightened and grieved, he flattened himself in the grass behind the house, not daring to move a muscle. At this moment, Yang Buhui giggled a couple of times and threw herself onto his back. Laughing, she said: "I've caught you, I've caught you!" She had been running around in the fields and had seen Zhang Wuji hide among the grass. She thought he was planning hide-and-seek with her and rushed forward to catch him. Zhang Wuji grabbed her, covered her mouth with one hand and whispered into her ear: "Keep quiet, don't let the evil people find us." Seeing that his face was pale and his expression frightened, Yang Buhui was shocked. Mijue Shitai came down from the slope hurriedly and told Ding Minjun: "Go and kill her bastard child. Don't allow future disaster to take root." Ding Minjun had seen how her shifu had dealt violently with Ji Xiaofu. Though she was inwardly happy, she was also greatly surprised. Hearing her shifu's orders, she quickly borrowed Bei Jinyi's sword and went off to look for Yang Buhui.

Zhang Wuji hugged Yang Buhui and shrank further back into the long grass. He didn't even dare take a deep breath. Ding Minjun looked everyone but couldn't find a trace of the little girl. As she decided to do a thorough search, Mijue Shitai scolded: "Useless thing! You can't even find a little girl!" Bei Jinyi had always gotten along well with Ji Xiaofu. After seeing her die under their shifu's palm and now trying to kill her only child, she could not hold back any longer. She said: "I'll go see whether the child has run out of the valley." She knew her shifu was impatient by nature. Once they have gone out to search for the child unsuccessfully, she would not bother coming back to look. Though a little girl left alone in the world might not survive, Bei Jinyi could not bear the idea of seeing her stabbed by Ding Minjun's sword. Mijue Shitai

said: "Why didn't you say so earlier?" Glaring at Bei, she led the chase out of the valley, with Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi following.

Yang Buhui still did not know that disaster had befallen her mother. Her eyes were open wide and round, darting around with a questioning look. Zhang Wuji placed his ear to the ground and listened. When he heard the three going further and further away, he jumped up, pulled Yang Buhui's hand and rushed up the slope. Yang Buhui laughed: "Brother Wuji, have the evil people gone? We're going up the mountain to play right?" Zhang Wuji did not answer. He only pulled her quickly to where Ji Xiaofu was. When Yang Buhui got closer and finally saw her mother lying on the ground, she was very frightened. She surged forward crying: "Mama, Mama!" and threw herself down next to her mother. Zhang Wuji tested her breath and found it to be extremely weak. He saw that her skull had been smashed by Meijue Shitai's palm. Even if Hu Qingniu arrived, it would be difficult to save her life. Ji Xiaofu opened her eyes slightly to see Zhang Wuji and her daughter. Her lips slightly moved as if she wanted to speak, but not a single sound came out. Two large tears flowed from her eyes. Zhang Wuji took out some golden needles and pushed them into her "Shen Ting", "Yin Tang" and "Cheng Qi" acupoints, reducing the pain in her head. Ji Xiaofu regained some strength and said softly: "I beg... beg you... to take her to her father.....I could not... could not harm her father....." Her left hand moved to her chest as if to retrieve some object but suddenly her head drooped and breathing stopped.

Yang Buhui hugged her mother's body, crying loudly she kept calling: "Mama, Mama, does it hurt a lot? Does it hurt a lot?" Ji Xiaofu gradually became cold, but she did not stop asking. She did not understand why her mother did not move at all, or why she did not answer her. Zhang Wuji already felt

great sorrow. Then when he thought about his parents tragic deaths, he too felt like howling. He could not stop tear from pouring from his eyes. The two of them cried for a while, then Zhang Wuji thought: "Before Auntie Ji died, she begged me to take Sister Buhui to her father. Erm, her father's name is Yang Xiao, he is the Ming Cult's Guang Ming Left Emissary, and he lives on Zuo Wang Summit in the Kunlun Mountains. I must take her there." He did not know that the Kunlun Mountains were tens of thousands of li to the west. How could two children make it all the way there? He had seen Ji Xiaofu reach towards her chest to retrieve something before her breath was cut short. Now he felt around her neck and found a silk cord hanging around her neck. From the cord hung a black pendant inlaid with a golden flame. Not knowing what it was, he just hung it around Yang Buhui's neck. Then he got an iron shovel out of the house and dug a grave to bury Ji Xiaofu's body. By this time, Yang Buhui had exhausted herself crying and had fallen into a deep sleep. When she woke up, Zhang Wuji told her that a mother had flown up to heaven and she will only come back down after a very long time.

After that, Zhang Wuji slapped a meal together for himself and Yang Buhui to eat. Exhausted, they both fell asleep on a couch. The next morning, he packed two small travel packs and the money that Hu Qingniu had given him, then took Yang Buhui to pay their respects in front of her mother's grave. That done, the two children left Butterfly Valley.

End of Chapter 13.

Chapter 14 - Meeting Zhongshan Wolf* Along the Way

(Translated by Efflix, IcyFox and Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The gold and silver blood snakes were leaning and snuggling on each other, looked very affectionate while crawling slowly to enter the Lingzhi Orchid paste circle. Zhang Wuji quickly placed one bamboo tube outside the circle's gap, while using the bamboo stick he gently pushed the tail of the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake moved in a lightning speed, immediately entered the tube.

The two people (Yang Buhui and Zhang Wuji) walked for half a day, only then did they finally leave the Butterfly Valley. Yang Buhui's feet were small and her legs were short and as a result couldn't walk any further. After resting for a while, they needed to hurry on the road again, repeatedly stopping and starting, so that on the first night they couldn't find a place to stay. They traveled until the sky was dark, but were still randomly travelling on the mountainside. The sounds of owls and wolves nearby made Yang Buhui start crying.

Zhang Wuji was also scared, so when he saw a cave next to the road, he pulled Yang Buhui inside the cave, hugging her and covering up her ears so that she couldn't hear the sounds of the animals. The two children, hungry and scared, suffered for an entire night. In the morning they were able to pick some wild fruit to eat and continued intermittently walking and resting.

Around noon, Yang Buhui suddenly cried out loud, pointing to a tree by the side of the road. When Zhang Wuji took a look, he saw two corpses hanging from a tree. Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui were so scared that they turned around and starting running. They weren't able to run more than ten paces when they tripped over a rock, falling down. Zhang Wuji bravely looked back, and this time was even more startled, blurting out "Mr. Hu!" The corpse hanging from the

tree was actually Hu Qingniu. The other corpse had long hair and was apparently a woman; from the appearance of her clothes, it seemed to be Hu Qingniu's wife Wang Nangu. The image of her long hair and corpse blowing in the wind created a dark, chilling air.

Zhang Wuji tried to stay calm and in good spirits, telling himself, "Don't be afraid, Don't be afraid!" He slowly started crawling toward the corpses, verifying that the corpses were Hu Qingniu and Wang Nangu. On each of their faces was something glittering - it turned out that each of them had a golden flower on their face. Zhang Wuji was disappointed, thinking, "so they weren't able to run away from Jing Hua Popo's poisonous hand after all" He saw that in the mountain gorge was a broken carriage and a mule that had drowned in the river. Zhang Wuji really started crying and decided to loosen the ropes, taking down the Hu couple's bodies from the tree.

All of a sudden, there was a "Clap!" sound; a book fell from Wang Nangu's body. Picking it up, he saw it was a handwritten book, titled "Wang Nangu's poison manual." When he flipped it open, he saw that the pages were filled with small print, detailing the toxicity of poisons and how to use them. Not only did it detail how to use poisonous medicine, but also poisonous weeds, snakes, centipedes, scorpions, spiders as well as other strange fish, insects, birds, flowers, fish and trees, leaving out nothing. He decided to keep it without much thought and put the Hu couple side by side, burying them with stones and dirt. He bowed down to the couple before grasping Yang Buhui's hand and continuing with their journey.

Shortly after they reached a large road, which then led them to a small town. Zhang Wuji wanted to buy some food to eat, but as he walked from house to house, they were all empty,

without even a single person. They had no choice but to continue their journey.

On the way, they noticed that the cornfields and rice fields were all dried up and desolate. Zhang Wuji was confused and worried, but he saw that Yang Buhui was able to not cry and keep walking which was already rather well-behaved, so what could he do? After a while, they saw next to the road were several corpses, with empty stomachs and sunken in cheeks – it was obvious at first glance that they had starved to death.

The more they walked the more they saw others like this. Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits, thinking, "Is there really nothing to eat? Are we also going to starve here like this?"

In the evening, they reached a small forest and saw some white smoke emerging into the sky. Zhang Wuji was very happy - they had not seen anyone or any smoke since they had left the Butterfly Valley, so he quickly ran towards the white smoke.

After going near the smoke, they saw two men wearing ragged clothes circling a pot of boiling water, adding firewood under the pot. When the two men heard footsteps, they turned around. When they saw Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui, they burst out with big smiles and jumped up. One of them waved a hand, "Small kids, good, come over here, come over here quickly. Where are the adults that came with you? Where did they go?"

Zhang Wuji said: "There's only the two of us, no adults came with us." The two adults broke out into big smiles, while saying, "What luck, what luck!" Zhang Wuji was so hungry, so he took a look into the big pot to see what it was, only to

see grass in boiling water.

One of the men grabbed Yang Buhui in one hand, exclaiming, "This small lamb is so fat and tender! Tonight we can eat until we're full, how nice." The other man said, "Very good, we can eat the little boy tomorrow." Zhang Wuji was very surprised, exclaiming, "What are you doing? Let go of my sister!"

The man ignored him and proceeded to laugh and start to tear off Yang Buhui's clothes, reaching into his boots to take out a knife, saying "It's been a long time since I ate such a fat and tender lamb." He grabbed Yang Buhui to the side, apparently to slaughter her. The other man took a bowl and followed him, saying, "Wasting lamb blood is a pity, we can cook a bowl of lamb blood soup, the flavor's not bad."

Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits, but he looked at them and it seemed that they really weren't joking. It really looked like they were about to slaughter Yang Buhui, so he yelled loudly, "You want to eat people? You aren't scared of harming heaven?"

The man holding the turkey bowl laughed and said, "Old man hasn't eaten a grain of rice for three months, if I don't eat a person, can I really eat a cow or lamb?"

For fear that Zhang Wuji would run away, he came over to grab Zhang Wuji's neck. Zhang Wuji dodged the man. With his left hand he pulled the man and with his right hand he hit the man's back.

He had learned martial arts from the Blond haired Lion King Xie Xun as well as his Wudang Palms from his parents. So even though these few years he had only learned medicine and had not practiced martial arts, he had good martial arts

habits and was able to exert good martial arts. He put forth this palm with great effort, and even someone studying martial arts for many years would've been unable to bear this palm, much less this ordinary village person. That man let out a "Hng!" before fainting and falling to the ground, unable to move.

Zhang Wuji immediately jumped up next to Yang Buhui. The other man exclaimed, "I'll kill you first", raising his knife and striking towards Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji used a move from Wudang Palms called "Wild Goose Wings"; his right foot flew, hitting the man in the wrist. The knife flew out of the man's hand. Zhang Wuji exerted another move called "Yuanyang lianhuan kick", following with another kick to the man's jaw. The man was in the process of opening his mouth to yell at him, but his jaws were forced shut by the kick, resulting in his biting his own tongue in half. Blood spurted out of his mouth and he fainted.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly went over to support Yang Buhui. At the same time, he heard the footsteps of others entering the forest. Yang Buhui was terrified when she heard the sounds of other people and hid herself in Zhang Wuji's arms. Zhang Wuji raised his head to take a look, but was calmed, shouting, "It's Mr. Jian, Mr. Xue."

Five people had entered the forest. One was KongDong's Jian Jie, and another was Huashan's Xue Gongyuan along with two of his martial brothers. All these people were healed by Zhang Wuji. The last person was an heroic looking approximately twenty year old youth with a broad forehead whom Zhang Wuji had never met before. Jian Jie made a "Heng!", saying, "Brother Zhang, you're here also? What happened to these two people?" As he was saying this, he

pointed to the two people on the ground.

Zhang Wuji indignantly told the story of what happened, ending with, "They even dared to eat people, aren't they outlaws?"

Jian Jie was staring at Yang Buhui, when all of a sudden saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth, so he licked his lips, saying, "Damn, for five days and five nights I haven't had a grain of rice in my stomach, only eating some tree bark and grass.....En, fine skin and meat, fatty and tender..."

Zhang Wuji saw that Jian Jie had a fire in his eyes, looking like a hungry wolf, with his mouth hanging wide open and his teeth gleaming. He really looked scary, so Zhang Wuji hugged Yang Buhui close to him. Xue Gongyuan asked, "Where is this girl's mother?"

Zhang Wuji thought in his heart: "If I say that Auntie died, they'll have even more evil thoughts." So he said, "Heroine Ji went out to buy some rice, she'll be back soon." Yang Buhui suddenly said, "No, My mom flew up to the sky!"

When Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan heard the two of them speaking, they knew Ji Xiaofu had already died. Xue Gongyuan laughed coldly, saying "Buying rice? If you find a grain of rice within these five hundred kilometers, you'll really have skills." Jian Jie shot a look at Xue Gongyuan, and the two suddenly jumped towards them. Jian Jie's two hands grabbed ahold of Zhang Wuji's shoulders. Xue Gongyuan's left hand covered Yang Buhui's mouth, and with his right hand he picked her up.

Zhang Wuji was startled and shouted, "What are you guys doing?" Jian Jie laughed and said, "In these thousand kilometers in Fengyang province, I've been so hungry I can't

stand it anymore. This girl isn't related to you, so we'll split a portion with you later." Zhang Wuji angrily insulted them: "You wrongly claim to be heroes, how can you bully a small orphan? If this gets out, how can you even claim to be human?"

Jian Jie flew into a rage, grabbed him with his left hand and hit him twice on the face, saying, "We'll kill you small beast along with her, we originally thought one small lamb might not've been enough."

Zhang Wuji had just taken care of the two villagers easily, but up against Kongdong's martial artists who had learned decades of martial arts, Zhang Wuji was easily captured and his struggles were in vain.

Xue Gongyuan's two martial brothers took some rope, tying up the two children. Zhang Wuji knew he would have no good luck today, and furiously regretted that he had saved these peoples' lives. People's hearts change quickly; who would know that these people would repay kindness with evil?

Jian Jie said, "Little beast, you healed this old man's head wound, so you've done some good for me, right? You must be hating me in your heart, right?" Zhang Wuji said: "Isn't this paying kindness with evil? I have no debts or business with you, if I didn't help you, how would you four have recovered from those strange diseases?"

Xue Gongyuan laughed and said, "Young man Zhang, after we were injured we've displayed this ugly attitude, we've even let you see it. If this becomes public, it'll be hard for us to live. Today we're starving, if we have no fresh meat in our stomachs, it'll also be hard for us to live. Why don't you save us to the end, save us one more time." Jian Jie was ferocious

and scary, but this Xue Gongyuan had a smiling appearance and was cunning and treacherous.

Zhang Wuji, seeing them couldn't help but feel his heart freeze in terror, and shouted loudly: "I'm in Wudang, this sister is part of Emei, if you harm us two, will the Five Heroes of Wudang and Mijue Shitai forgive you?"

Jian Jie was startled and made an "e" sound, feeling that there was some truth in his words - it was not a good idea to provoke Wudang and Emei. Xue Gongyuan laughed and said: "Here only the sky and ground will know, and you and I will know. Once you're in our stomachs, go grumble to Zhang SanFeng."

Jian Jie guffawed, saying: "I'm so hungry fire is about to come out of my stomach, even if you were my brother or son, I'd eat your skin and bones." He turned around and said to Xue Gongyuan's martial brothers: "Quickly bring some fire and cook some soup, what are you waiting for?" Those two got the pot; one of them went to the creek to get water, and the other went to start the fire.

Zhang Wuji said, "Mr. Xue, those two people are already dead, if you're hungry and want to eat people, wouldn't eating them be good?" Xue Gongyuan laughed and said, "These two men are just skin and bones, they're not only old and tough, but hard and stinky, who wouldn't eat tender lamb but eat old sheep instead?"

Zhang Wuji usually would have a brave attitude, if someone was going to hit or kill him, he wouldn't beg to be spared. However, when he was trapped by these evil men, about to be eaten alive, he couldn't help but offer up a few words to try to plead for his life. But Xue Gongyuan instead just jeered repeatedly, "Haha, Wudang's and Emei's disciples claim to

be the strongest and rule Jianghu, but today you're going to be eaten bite by bite. It would be really strange if Zhang Sanfeng or Old Nun Miejue knew about this and weren't angered to death."

Enraged, Zhang Wuji shouted, "Mr. Xue, if you have to eat people, then eat me. I just beg you to let this small sister go, then I can die with no regrets." Xue Gongyuan asked, "Why?" Zhang Wuji replied: "When her mother died, she trusted me to bring this little girl to her father. Today, if you eat just me, you will be full, tomorrow you can go buy some cows, lamb, or rice, please spare this little girl."

Jian Jie saw that he was able to fearlessly face danger at such a small age and with such a heroic and chivalrous air. He really thought this was something to be admired and couldn't help but be moved and hesitated, asking, "What should we do?" Xue Gongyuan replied, "Saving this small girl isn't a big deal. However, this may leak out; in the future, when Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou come to find us, Brother Jian should have certain methods to take care of them." Jian Jie nodded his head, saying, "What you said is also true. I'm a fool, never thinking of the future."

While saying these words, the other Huashan disciples returned with the pot of water and put it on the fire. Zhang Wuji knew the situation was urgent and shouted, "Little Sister Buhui, swear an oath to them that in the future you won't speak of today's events." Yang Buhui, confused, just cried out, "Can't eat you, can't eat you!" She didn't understand what Zhang Wuji was saying, but vaguely knew that he was sacrificing himself to protect her.

Meanwhile, the bold looking youth silently sat to the side, not speaking or moving. Jian Jie stared at him for a second, saying, "Xu Xiaoshe, if you want to eat lamb, you must also be willing to handle the lamb's body." In the region of Hao Si,

they called young men “xiaoshe.” That young man replied, “Yes!” He pulled out a small knife from his waist and said, “Killing pigs and cows are my specialty.” He clenched the knife in his teeth and carried Yang Buhui and Zhang Wuji in each hand toward the mountain creek.

Zhang Wuji protested loudly and tried to bite his arm but couldn’t reach it. Xu xiaoshe walked away for more than ten steps when Xue Gongyuan said, “Xu xiaoshe, slaughter them here!” Xu xiaoshe looked back and replied, “Slaughtering them in the creek is better, it’ll be cleaner there.” However, the knife was clenched in his teeth so his words were unclear, but his legs didn’t slow down at all. Xue Gongyuan said, “If I tell you to stay here, then you’ll stay here.” He had noticed that Xu xiashe looked kind of strange; he was worried that Xu xiaoshe would run away with the two kids to eat them by himself.

Xu xiaoshe whispered, “Quick, run away!” He put the two of them on the ground and stretched out his knife to cut the ropes that were binding them. Zhang Wuji said, “Thank you for your great kindness in saving our lives.” He grabbed Yang Buhui’s hand and pulled her up to run away. Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan both shouted and jumped up to chase them. Xu xiaoshe grabbed his knife to block them and shouted, “Stop!”

When Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan saw him with the knife guarding his chest heroically blocking them, they were startled. Jian Jie said, “What are you doing?” Xu xiaoshe said, “If we’re walking around Jiang Hu together, bullying the small and the weak, wouldn’t we be laughed at by all the heroes under the sky?” Xue Gongyuan indignantly replied, “Hunger is urgent, I would even eat my mother or the old and the young.” He waved a hand to his two martial brothers, “Hurry up, chase them!”

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui couldn't run quickly, especially since he was carrying her. He was already rather small, so carrying her made him even slower. Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan each pulled out their weapons and attacked Mr. Xu. After fighting for a little bit, Jian Jie with a stroke of his knife managed to cut Xu xiaoshe's leg, causing it to drip wet with blood. Xu xiaoshe couldn't hold out any longer and suddenly lifted up his knife and threw it towards Xue Gongyuan. Xue Gongyuan ducked to the side, and Xu xiaoshe managed to rush out.

Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie didn't chase him, instead going after Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Mr. Xu from far away shouted, "Brother Zhang, don't be nervous, I'll go find helpers to help you," Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan worked together and managed to again capture Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Jian Jie stared at Xue Gongyuan, shouting, "This person named Xu isn't a good person, why would you travel with him?"

Xue Gongyuan said, "This companion I randomly bumped into on the road, how would I know whether he's good or bad? He said his surname was Xu, named something like Xu Da. Don't listen to him, the sky's black already, where would he go to find help around here?" One of the Huashan disciples said, "Listening to his accent, he's native to this Fengyang Prefect, haha, even if he brought some country bumpkins here, we wouldn't be scared of them." Jian Jie laughed, "Fengyang's people are so hungry they can't even crawl. Let's quickly cook these two lambs into a delicious meal, it is right to eat a full meal."

This was the second time Zhang Wuji was captured; he was hit until his nose and mouth were blue and swollen and his clothes were torn. His possessions and money were all

scattered on the ground. He thought in his heart, "So this Mr. Xu's name was Xu Da, this man is a good friend, too bad my life is so short and can't be better friends with him." When he bowed his head down to the ground, he saw a handwritten yellow-papered book on the ground blowing in the wind. This was the Wang Nangu poison manual taken from Wang Nangu's body. His eyes followed the words on the page and noticed that "poisonous mushrooms" was written, with small words detailing the forms of poisonous mushrooms such as their odor, color, toxicity, antidotes, type after type. His heart was in turmoil, how could he take this into his head?

All of a sudden when he glanced to the left, he saw that about four or five feet away, under some rotten tree bark, were more than ten mushrooms with vivid colors. His heart jumped and he thought, "What type of mushroom is this? I don't know whether there's poison or not on it. The poison manual says that most poisonous mushrooms have vivid colors. If these poisonous mushrooms are toxic, there is hope to save Sister Buhui's life.

At this time he already wasn't thinking of his own life, as he already had the cold poison inside him that was difficult to expel. If he managed to run away with his life today, he would only live for a few months anyways, so he really only hoped to save Yang Buhui. He sat on the ground, slowly moving his feet and bottom and turned his body around, reaching out his hand to pick those mushrooms. At this time the sky already was black; everyone was ready for the fire to burn, so nobody really paid attention to him. Zhang Wuji suddenly turned his eyes to the direction that Xu Da had run, jumping up and down and shouting, "Brother Xu, you've brought people here, save us! Save us!"

Jian Jie and the others thought it was real, so the four of them grabbed their weapons and jumped up. Zhang Wuji took

advantage of the four of them looking for Xu Da and backed up two steps, putting the mushrooms into the iron pot. Jian Jie and the others didn't see anyone and started cursing, "Little bastard, even if you become crazy nobody's going to come help you." Xue Gongyuan said, "Prepare the knife, who wants to start?" Jian Jie said, "I'll kill the small girl, you kill that guy." As he was saying this he took his hand and grabbed Yang Buhui.

Zhang Wuji said, "Mr. Xue, my throat's really thirsty, can you give me some hot soup, that way when I die my ghost won't bother you. Xue Gongyuan said, "Alright, what's wrong with letting you drink some soup?" Xue Gongyuan scooped some hot soup into the bowl for him. Before the soup reached his mouth, Zhang Wuji loudly shouted, "How tasty! How tasty!" Indeed, once the mushrooms had been boiling in the pot, they released a fragrant smell. Xue Gongyuan had been hungry for a long time, so when he smelled the fragrant soup, he grabbed Zhang Wuji's soup and drank it into his stomach, licking his lips and saying, "Really fresh!"

Jian Jie reached out and grabbed the bowl and also drank a large mouthful, and once again drank another bowl. Xue Gongyuan and the other two Huashan disciples also drank two bowls, so that when the two bowls of hot soup were in their stomachs, they felt an unspeakable comfort. Jian Jie even took the mushrooms in the pot and ate them. Nobody even asked where the mushrooms were from. After Jian Jie ate the mushroom, he patted his stomach, laughing, "First eat some appetizers, then eat the lamb."

His left hand raised Yang Buhui behind him, and his right hand raised a knife. Zhang Wuji saw that after many people drank the mushroom soup there was no effect, so in his heart he thought that the mushrooms didn't have poison after all and could not help but feel bitter. Jian Jie took two steps

when all of a sudden, he shouted, "Aiyo!" His body faltered for a few moments before he fell on the ground, throwing Yang Buhua and the knife to the side. Xue Gongyuan was startled and asked, "Brother Jian, what happened?" He ran over to look down at his body. When he stooped down, he also couldn't stand up straight anymore and fell on Jian Jie's body. The other two Huashan disciples also were poisoned and died miserably.

Wuji shouted loudly, "Thank heaven and earth!" He rolled over to the knife and grasped the knife, cutting Yang Buhui's ropes. Yang Buhui's trembling hands also managed to cut Zhang Wuji's ropes after wounding his palms a few times. Having just escaped from death, the two of them were exceedingly happy and hugging each other. When Zhang Wuji went to see the four other people, he just saw that every person's face had turned black and that their muscles were warped. Their bodies were really scary and he thought, "That Wang Nangu's poison manual really is valuable, I'll keep it with me and resolve to really study it carefully."

Zhang Wuji carried Yang Buhui's hand and left the forest. They traveled along Yaomi road, when suddenly from the east they saw light from a torch. There were seven or eight people grasping their weapons and running quickly towards them. Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui hid in the underbrush.

When those people ran nearby, Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui saw that one of the people was Xuda. He was the one carrying a torch in his left hand, while in his right hand he was carrying a pike, shouting, "You wicked thieves that would harm the sky and eat people, quickly lay down your lives!" When they entered the forest, they saw the four of them dead on the ground and were startled. Xu Da shouted, "Brother Zhang, are you ok? We are here to save you!" Zhang Wuji shouted, "Big Brother Xu, your brother is here!" and

came out of the underbrush.

Xuda was very happy and hugged him, saying, "Brother Zhang, you have such a chivalrous character, not to mention among children, even among adults it's hard to find such a person. I was scared that you'd be harmed by those evil thieves, fortunately there's good news and the evil receive their punishment, this is a good judgment.

When they asked how Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan were poisoned, Zhang Wuji told them the story of cooking the mushrooms in the soup. Everyone praised him as clever. Xuda said, "These are all my good friends, they slaughtered a bull. A large fire is at Huang Jue Si Temple where the meat is being cooked. I went to find them and they all came. But if it weren't for Brother Zhang's cleverness, we still would've come too late." He introduced everyone to Zhang Wuji. On one side, a big eared guy was named Tang He, another heroic, exuberant one was named Deng Yu, a black faced, tall one was named Hua Yun; of two fair skinned brothers, the older one was named Wu Liang, and the younger was named Wu Zhen. The last one was a monk; his appearance was very ugly, with a protruding chin, resembling an iron shovel. Many scars and moles were on his face, and he had two sunken in eyes that were bright and unusually. Xuda said, "This person is Brother Zhu, his given name is Yuanzhang. He became a monk in Huang Juesi temple.

Hua Yun laughed and said, "He is an unconventional, happy monk, not one of those who loves to read Buddhist scriptures and worship Buddha, drinking wine and eating meat all day. When Yang Buhui saw Zhu Yuanzhang's ugly appearance, she felt afraid in her heart and hid behind Zhang Wuji. Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "Even though this Buddhist monk eats meat, I don't eat people, so little sister doesn't need to be afraid." Tang He said, "The beef we've been

cooking in that pot should be ready now." Hua Yun said, "Let's go! Little sister, I'll carry you." He carried Yang Buhui on his back, walking with big steps. When Zhang Wuji saw this capable man was so happy and outgoing, he was also happy in his heart.

When they had walked around two and a half kilometers, they arrived at a temple. They walked inside the main hall and noticed the fragrant aroma of the roasting meat. Wu Liang said, "It's done, it's cooked!" Xuda said, "Brother Zhang, rest here, we'll get the meat ready."

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui sat shoulder-to-shoulder on a cushion in the palace. Zhu Yuan Zhang, Xu Da, Tang He, Deng Yu and others moved quickly and brought out large pots and bowls of freshly-cooked beef. The brothers Wu Liang and Wu Zhen carried out a jug of fragrant wine and in a short while were singing and making merry in front of the Bodhisattva's statue.

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui were already very hungry, so with the beef in their stomach, they were pleased beyond words. Hua Yun said, "Brother Xu, among all our Cult rules, we are not allowed to consume meat; this might be a little inappropriate."

Zhang Wuji was inwardly surprised, "So they are all members of the Ming Cult. The Cult rules only permit them to eat vegetarian dishes and to worship the demons, yet over here they are all merrily eating the meat."

Xu Da replied, "Our Cult's first rule is to 'Promote Kindness and Destroy Evil'; even though eating meat isn't a good thing, but it can't be totally avoided. Over here there isn't any rice or vegetables, so how can we just stare at the meat and starve to death?"

Deng Yu clapped his hands and said, "Brother Xu's words are insightful, eat! Eat!"

When they were eating and drinking, all of a sudden there was the sound of footsteps outside the door. Soon after, someone knocked on the door. Tang He jumped up and shouted, "Aiya! Zhang's household is outside searching for this cow!" The door was opened, and in came two servants, heroic looking with protruding chests and bellies. One person shouted, "Alright! Our house's big cow was actually stolen by you guys and eaten!" When he said this, he grabbed Zhu Yuanzhang. The other one said, "You lowly monk, today your entire club is here sharing the spoils, where can you run to? Tomorrow we'll send you to the mansion, and kill you by hitting you to death with a wooden board."

Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "You're really speaking rubbish, how would you dare blame us for stealing that cow? Monks eat vegetables and pray to Buddha. If you're accusing me of eating meat, isn't this committing a great sin?" The heroic servant pointed to the meat inside of the plate, saying, "This isn't beef?"

Zhu Yuanzhang gave a signal with his eyes and laughed, "Who says this is beef?" The Wu Liang and Wu Zhen brothers walked up to the two servants and with a shout, grabbed the two men's arms. Zhu Yuanzhang took out a short dagger from his pocket and laughed, "Two brothers, I don't want to hide this from you, what we're eating isn't beef, but human meat. Today you've seen this, so we'll just have to eat you so you won't talk and leak this out. With a "chi" sound, one of the servant's clothes was torn and the knife produced a line of blood on his chest. The heroic servant was really startled, even begging, "Spare us, spare our lives!" Zhu Yuanzhang grabbed a piece of beef and stuffed into the two servant's mouths, saying, "Swallow it!"

The two of them even didn't dare to chew it and swallowed it into their stomachs. Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "You can go out and tell your master we've stolen your cow, we can then cut open your stomachs and say, who're the ones that have eaten the beef, not even cleaning off the hair?" He flipped over the knife, dragging a line along their bellies. That person just felt a cold, icy knife on his stomach and was scared out of wits, screaming. The Wu brothers laughed, lifted up their legs and kicked the two out of the palace hall. Everyone was relieved and started eating quickly, laughing and insulting the two servants who had asked for their miserable experience. On normal days, the Zhang household would bully around the villagers. This time, they were so scared about their bellies being cut open, they surely wouldn't go out and tell them about everyone stealing the cow.

Zhang Wuji thought his actions were funny and admirable and pondered, "Despite this monk's ugly appearance, his behavior is upright and refreshing. His methods are really formidable." Zhu Yuanzhang had heard Xuda tell the story of how Zhang Wuji was willing to sacrifice himself to save Yang Buhui's life and was really fond of this chivalrous youth. He didn't treat him as a normal child, instead proposing a toast to him and treating him like a good friend. They drank until they were intoxicated, when Deng Yu said, "Us Han people have really endured the oppression of these barbarians, receiving an era of their dirty farts. Until today we haven't been able to have a good meal. If these days go on, how can we take it?" Hua Yun clapped his leg and said, "Half of the common people in Fengyang prefecture have died, really half of all the people under heaven have died of starvation, why don't we stake all of it and fight those Tartars?"

Xuda said with a clear voice, "Today people's lives have been

put on the same level as dogs and goats. This good little brother and sister nearly went into people's stomachs. Under the sky, who knows how many common people have become like cows and sheep? If upright men can't help all these people, living is really living in vain." Tang He also said, "Not bad, our luck was good today, we managed to find a cow to slaughter and eat, tomorrow we may not necessarily find one to steal. Everyone doesn't have enough clothes and food, do even upright men and heroes have to become thieves?"

As these people spoke they became more and more furious and began insulting the Tartars for inflicting suffering on them. Zhu Yuanzhang said, "We're randomly insulting these people here, but these insults aren't even going to hurt a hair on these Tartars. If we're really heroic, we should go to kill these Tartars!" Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, and the Wu brothers all yelled together, "Let's go!"

Xuda said, "Big Brother Zhu, you don't need to be this hard-working monk anymore. You're the oldest, we'll all listen to your words." Zhu Yuanzhang also didn't decline and said, "After today, we will live and die together, whether we have fortune or problems we will share it together." Everyone raised their bowl of wine together and drank it down, slamming their knives into the table with a heroic air. Yang Buhui looked at everyone, not understanding what they were saying and was inwardly scared.

Zhang Wuji thought, Zhang Sanfeng Tai Shifu warned me repeatedly not make friends with these people in the Mo Jiao. But Chang Yucun and Brother Xu are all within the Mo Jiao. They're far better than Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan, these disciples in the righteous branch by tens of thousands of times. He always admired Zhang Sanfeng to the highest degree, but from his experience, he thought Zhang Sanfeng had some prejudice towards them in his heart. However, he

also thought that he shouldn't go against his Tai Shifu's wishes. Zhu Yuangzhang said, "Good Han people will do what they say, this time when we eat full is just the right time to do things. The Zhang household invited the Tartar officers and soldiers to dinner today, let's go capture and kill them. Hua Yun said, "Wonderful! " and grabbed his knife and stood up.

Xuda exclaimed, "Hold on a minute!" He went to the kitchen to get a basket and filled it with fourteen or fifteen pounds of beef to give to Zhang Wuji. He said, "Brother Zhang, your age is still small, you can't follow us to this shady business of rebelling and killing government officials. Us small group of people are so poor, without money on our bodies, so we must give this meat to you. If we luckily don't burn to death, we will see each other in the future and eat some beef together.

Zhang Wuji took the basket and replied, "I hope that you will perform a great service and wipe out these Tartars in order to let these common people under the sky have some food to eat." Zhu Yuangzhang, Xuda, Tanghe, Deng Yu all heard what he said and clapped and praised what he said, saying: "Brother Zhang, what you said is really correct, we hope that we will have some time together in the future."

As they said this they exited the temple, each carrying their weapons. Zhang Wuji thought in his heart, "They are going to go kill the Tartars, if I wasn't accompanying this little sister, I would also go with them. They only have seven people and are not the enemy's match. Zhang Yuan's house have Tartars who may follow them here to kill them so I can't really stay in this temple anymore. So he took his basket of beef and took Yang Buhui outside the temple. After traveling in the dark for four or five miles, suddenly they saw that to the north there was a red light rising to the sky and knew that Zhu Yuangzhang and Xuda were successful and had burnt

down Zhang Yuan's manor, making them very happy. At night the two of them slept on a mountain plain, and in the morning they proceeded westward. The two children endured wind, frost, hunger, and cold while walking along the road, making them exhausted. Fortunately Yang Buhui's parents were martial artists, so her own physique was healthy and strong so a small girl traveling for such a long distance was able to avoid sickness. On the way, she did have some colds, so Zhang Wuji picked some herbal medicine and was able to cure it. Every day they did have to rest, so they could only cover 20 or 30 miles in a day. After about fifteen or sixteen days, they reached Henan province.

There was not much difference between Henan and Anhui province - everywhere they went, there was famine and people were dying of starvation. Zhang Wuji made a bow and arrow and managed to shoot some birds and animals - one day they would be full, and another they would be hungry, slowly making their way east. Fortunately, they did not run into the Mongolian military, and they also did not run into any Jiang Hu people. As for those ordinary criminals with evil thoughts, how would they match up with Zhang Wuji? One day they ran into an old man and told him they wanted to go to the summit of Mt. Kunlun. This old man was startled and raised his eyebrows, saying, "Little brother, Kunlun Mountain is still about 108,000 li (a 'li' = 0.5 km) away, I heard that a Tang monk only went there to fetch some scriptures. You little kids aren't crazy are you? Where do you live? Quickly go back home!" When Zhang Wuji heard this, he could not help but feel disappointed, thinking, "Kunlun Mt. is so far, it's really impossible to go there, so the best thing to do is to go to Wudang to see Grandmaster first." But then he thought: "Someone trusted in me, even though the road is far, how can one stop in the middle? My own life is not long, if I can't send Sister Buhui before I die, I really can't be forgiven by Aunt Ji." So without saying anything else to the old man, he

pulled up Yang Buhui and continued their journey.

Later, after walking for more than twenty days, the two children's clothing were tattered, their appearances were wan and sallow. The thing that vexed Zhang Wuji most was that Yang Buhui constantly asked for her Mama. She would frequently cry for half a day because Mama did not fly back down from the sky. Zhang Wuji tried his best to distract her by telling her stories, by saying that their journey to the west this time was also to look for her Mama, by making faces and all kinds of things that would turn her tears into laughter.

One particular day they arrived at Zhumadian [a city in Henan]. It was the end of autumn, early winter. The new moon wind was blowing hard. Since the two children only had the clothes on their backs, they were shivering incessantly. Zhang Wuji took out his tattered outer garment and put it on Yang Buhui.

"Wuji Gege," Yang Buhui asked, "Aren't you cold?"

"I am not cold," Zhang Wuji replied, "I feel unbearably hot," while doing some jumping jacks to keep himself warm.

"You are so good to me!" Yang Buhui said, "I know you are cold, but you give your clothes to me." The little girl spoke like an adult, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel astonished.

Right that moment, they heard the sound of clashing weapons coming from the other side of the hill, followed by footsteps coming closer. A female voice called out, "Evil thief, you have been hit by my 'wei du sang men' nail [lit. feed the poison, mourning gate, loose translation: as soon as you are hit, you are at the death door]. The faster you run, the quicker the poison will flare-up!"

Zhang Wuji quickly pulled Yang Buhui to hide under the bush by the roadside. They saw a sturdy-looking man, about thirty some years of age, flying their way. Several 'zhang's behind him, a woman ran after him with a pair of sabers in her hand. The man staggered, his legs turned weak and he stumbled down on the ground.

The woman soon arrived by his side. "Finally, you will be dead under the Miss' hands!" she called out.

The man suddenly sprang up and struck her with his right palm. 'Bang!' the palm hit the woman's chest. The force behind the strike was very strong. The woman fell backwards the pair of sabers in her hands was flung far away.

The man reached to his back to pull the nail out. "Give me the antidote," he said hatefully.

The woman laughed coldly and said, "This time Shifu ordered us to pursue and capture you; he gave us the poisonous secret projectiles, but did not give us the antidote. Since I have fallen into your hands, I accept my fate, but do not even think that you can live either."

With the saber in his left hand on her throat, the man's right hand searched inside her pocket, and sure enough, there was no antidote. The man got very angry. He took the 'wei du sang men' nail and stabbed the woman shoulder with all his might. He roared, "Now you can taste your own 'wei du sang men' nail! You, Kunlun Pai ..." Before he finished speaking, the poison on his back flared up and he crumpled to the ground.

The woman struggled to crawl up; but 'wah!' after vomiting a mouthful of blood, she fell back down. She pulled the nail on her shoulder and tossed it to the ground. The man and the

woman both lied on the grass by the roadside. Their breathing was labored; they constantly gasped for air.

Ever since he treated Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan and almost died in their hands, Zhang Wuji was extremely wary towards the Wulin characters. This time, as he watched the drama unfold in front of him, he did not dare to come out.

After a while the man heaved a long sigh and said, "Today I, Su Xizhi, will lose my life at Zhumadian; yet I still do not know my offense against the Kunlun Pai. I will die with my eyes wide open. You have pursued me for a thousand 'li' and determined to kill me, in the end, what was that for? Miss Zhan, why don't you be nice and tell me!" There was no trace of hostility in his voice anymore.

The woman, Zhan Chun, knew her school's 'wei du sang men' nail was very fierce, so she realized that both of them were going to die together. She was completely disheartened and quietly said, "Who told you to peek when Shifu was training his sword technique? This technique, the 'Kun Lun Liang Yi Jian' [double-appearance sword], should be personally taught by him, the Senior, if anybody is caught looking without permission, even our own School's disciple must suffer punishment by his or her eyes being gouged; much less you, an outsider?"

"Ah," Su Xizhi exclaimed. "Damn it! Should die! Should die!" he cursed.

Zhan Chun angrily said, "Your death is imminent, you still cursed my Shifu?"

Su Xizhi said, "I want to curse him. What are you going to do? Isn't this injustice? I was just passing through Bai Niu Shan [White Ox Mountain], and accidentally saw that your

Shifu was practicing his sword. Because I was curious, I stopped and watched for a moment. Do you think that by watching for a moment I would be able to master this sword technique? If I have that kind of ability, how can you, a bunch of Kunlun disciples, possibly defeat me? Miss Zhan, let me tell you this: your Shifu, Tie Qin Xiansheng [Mister Iron 'Qin' – zither] is too narrow-minded. Not to mention that I did not learn even half a stance of the Kunlun Liang Yi Jian, even if I did, can you really say that I have committed a capital crime?"

Zhan Chun was silent. Inwardly she agreed that her master had made a big fuss over a minor issue. Just because he found out that Su Xizhi saw him launching the sword technique, he dispatched six disciples to pursue and kill him for thousands of 'li'. In the end, she was going to die together with this man. She believed at this moment this man had no reason to lie, so if he said that he did not steal the martial art technique, then she believed he was telling the truth.

Su Xizhi also said, "He gave you these Wei Du secret projectiles, but did not give you the antidote. Is there such custom within the Wulin world? Damn it ..."

In a soft voice Zhan Chun said, "Su Dage [big brother], Xiaomei [little sister – referring to self] has harmed you. Right now my heart is heavy with regret. It's good that I will accompany you to the other world. This is called fate. I only feel sorry for your family, your wife and children [Translator's note: the original Chinese text was much more polite; she called his wife 'Da Sao' (eldest sister-in-law), and the children 'gongzi' and 'xiaojie' (young master and young miss).] I really have no idea what I had done."

Su Xizhi sighed and said, "My woman died two years ago, leaving behind a boy and a girl to me, one is six years old,

the other is four. Tomorrow they will become orphans with no father and no mother.”

“Do you have any other family member?” Zhan Chun asked, “Anybody to look after the children?”

“Presently my sister-in-law is looking after them,” Su Xizhi said, “But she is rather short-tempered; oftentimes she is mean and unreasonable, I think she is a bit jealous of me. Ay! From now on these two babies will have to suffer a lot of pains.”

Zhan Chun said in a low voice, “It’s all my fault.”

Su Xizhi shook his head and said, “I can’t blame you on this. You have received your school’s strict order, and thus have no choice but to obey; it’s not like you have a personal enmity against me. In fact, after I got hit with your Wei Du secret projectile, I will certainly die; why should I strike you with my palm and use the secret projectile to injure you? Otherwise, I am saying this with all honesty: I know you have a good conscience, certainly you would be willing to look after my two cruel-fated children.”

Forcing a smile, Zhan Chun said, “I am the murderer who killed you, how can you say I have a good conscience?”

Su Xizhi said, “I really do not blame you, I do not blame you at all.”

Just now, the two of them were fighting a life and death battle, but as they realized they were going to die soon, they both were reluctant to leave the world of the living and their hearts were filled with nothing but kindness and goodwill.

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji thought, “Looks like these

man and woman are not bad people; besides, that surnamed Su still have two small children.” Remembering the hardship Yang Buhui and he suffered because they were orphans, he came out of his hiding place underneath the bushes and said, “Miss Zhan, do you know the kind of poison you have on your Wei Du nail?” To see a teenager and a little girl suddenly appear from the bushes, Su Xizhi and Zhan Cun had already felt strange. They were even more surprised to hear Zhang Wuji asking the question.

Zhang Wuji said, “I have a rudimentary knowledge of medicine. Gentleman and Lady have been poisoned, you might not be beyond help.”

Zhan Chun said, “What kind of poison, I may not know. But the wound is unbearably itchy. My Shifu said that after one got hit by this Sang Men nail, one will have only eight hours to live.”

Zhang Wuji said, “Let me have a look at the wound.”

Su and Zhan, two people noticed that he was young, his clothes were raggedy, his entire body was filthy; in short, he looked more like a beggar to them, what could he possibly know about treating poison wound?

In a rough voice Su Xizhi said, “Look, our lives are in danger. This is not a place for children to create trouble. Just go far away from me, alright?”

Zhang Wuji did not pay him any attention; he picked the Sang Men nail from the ground and sniffed it. He smelled a whiff of faint fragrance of flower. These days, whenever he had some time during their journey, he would flip the pages of Wang Nangu’s ‘Poison Manual’, to acquaintance himself with the fantastic oddities of every description of the poisons

and venoms around the world. As soon as he smelled this kind of aroma, he knew at once that the poison on the Sang Men nail was from the blue 'tuo luo' flower [*Datura stramonium*(?)]. The Poison Manual did say that the juice of this flower's original smell was stinky like dead fish. In itself, it was not poisonous, even if one to drink an entire bowl it would not bring the least bit of harm, but as soon as it is mixed with blood, it would turn into deadly poison, while its smell would turn fragrant.

"This is the poison from the 'tuo luo' flower," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhan Chun did not know what kind of poison was applied on the Sang Men nails, but she knew that there was indeed this kind of flower in her Shifu's flower garden. "Ah," she exclaimed in surprise, "How do you know?" The blue 'tuo luo' flower was a very rare poisonous flower; it originated from the western region, and had never been found in the central China.

Zhang Wuji nodded. "I know," he said. Taking Yang Buhui's hand, he said, "Let's go."

"Xiao Xiongdi [little brother]," Zhan Chun busily said, "If you know the treatment, please be kind and save our lives."

At first, Zhang Wuji was considering to help them, however, he suddenly remembered the evil expressions on Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan's faces when they were about to eat them, he could not help but hesitate.

Su Xizhi said, "Xiao Xianggong [young master], I [orig. zaixia – the lowly or humble one] have eyes but failed to see an expert; please do not blame me."

“Alright,” Zhang Wuji said, “Let me have a try.” Taking some golden needles from his pocket, he pierced the ‘shan zhong xue’ [lit. sheep’s odor acupoint] on Zhan Chun’s chest, and the ‘que pen xue’ [empty basin acupoints] on her left and right shoulders, to stop the pain in her chest due to the palm injury she received earlier.

“This ‘tuo luo’ flower will become poisonous as soon as it meets the blood,” he said, “But it will not create any harm if it enters the stomach. The two of you need to suck each other’s wound first, until the blood is free of any coagulation.”

Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun were embarrassed and felt uncomfortable, but right now, their lives were more important, besides, there was no way they would be able to suck their own wounds. Therefore, left with no other choice, they sucked the poisonous blood from each other’s wound.

Zhang Wuji picked three kinds of herbal medicine by the hillside; he chewed it until it was mushy and then applied it on the two people’s wounds. “These three types of herbal medicine can temporarily stop the attack of the poison, but it is ineffective to drive the poison completely out of your systems,” he said, “We must go to the next town and look for a drugstore, and then I will mix the medicine to treat your poison.”

Originally, the wounds on Su and Zhan, two people, were unbearably itchy, but as soon as the herbal medicine was applied, they felt cool and comfortable, while at the same time their limbs were no longer numb and weak. At once they repeatedly expressed their gratitude.

Each one of them broke a tree branch to use it as a crutch, then helping each other, they slowly continued their journey

ahead. Zhan Chun asked Zhang Wuji's school and origin. Zhang Wuji did not want to explain the truth, he simply said that he understood medicine since his childhood.

After walking for more than two hours, they arrived at the town of Shahe [in Hebei province]. The four of them found an inn to rest. Zhang Wuji wrote a prescription and Su Xizhi had an inn-helper to get the medicine. By this time, the area west of Henan and Hebei had not suffered disaster; although the Mongolian government officers practiced unruly and tyrannical cruelty, they were not in the least different than any other places, the common people still had food to eat. The shops and inns in Shahe were open for business as usual. As soon as the inn-helper returned with the medicine, Zhang Wuji cooked it and fed it to Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun.

The four of them stayed in the inn for three days. Each day Zhang Wuji changed the prescription. He applied the medicine externally as well as internally. By the fourth day, the poison in Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun's bodies had been completely eradicated. The two of them profusely expressed their gratitude; they asked Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui's destination. Zhang Wuji mentioned the name of Zuo Wang Peak of the Kunlun Mountain.

"Su Dage," Zhan Chun said, "We owe our lives to this Xiao Xiongdi. However, my five Shixiong [martial brother] are still out there looking for you. This matter has not been brought to completion yet. What do you say you come with me going up Mount Kunlun?"

Su Xizhi was stunned. "Going up Mount Kunlun?" he asked.

"That's right," Zhan Chun said, "I will accompany you to pay a visit to my master. We will explain that you have not learned even half a stance of the Kunlun Liang Yi Jian. If we

do not resolve this matter with him, the Senior, you will face an endless disaster in the future.”

Su Xizhi was angry in his heart, he said, “You, Kunlun Pai, bully others too much. I just took one look and I nearly entered the gates of hell. Isn’t that enough?”

“Su Dage,” Zhan Chun said in gentle voice, “Please think about the difficulty Xiao Mei has to face. It’s not a problem for me to explain to my Shifu that you did not draw any advantage in sword technique from watching him; however, if my five Shixiong get hold of you and harm you, how would Xiao Mei feel?”

After going through life and death situation together for several days, their affection to each other grew. Listening to her gentle words full of tender feeling, Su Xizhi’s anger subsided at once. He also thought, “Kunlun Pai is strong in numbers; if they do not stop harassing me, eventually I will lose my life under their hands.”

Seeing him hesitate, Zhan Chun continued, “Please come with me first. Whatever important matter you need to attend, Xiao Mei will come with you and together we will deal with it after our visit to Mount Kunlun. What do you say?”

Su Xizhi was delighted. “Alright,” he said, “Let’s do it this way. Only I wonder whether Zun Shi [revered master] would trust me?”

Zhan Chun said, “Usually Shifu is very fond of me. If I earnestly ask him, I am sure he will not make things difficult for you. As soon as this matter is settled, Xiao Mei is thinking of visiting your young master and young miss, so that they will not be bullied by your sister-in-law.”

Hearing the way she talked, Su Xizhi knew the feeling between them was mutual; he was very happy. To Zhang Wuji he said, "Xiao Xiongdi, let us go up the Mount Kunlun together, so that we will keep each other company."

Zhan Chun said, "The Kunlun Mountains stretch for thousands of 'li'; I don't even know how many peaks there are. I don't know where that Zuo Wang Peak is, but if our Kunlun Pai is looking for a peak on Kunlun Mountains, I am sure we will find it."

The next day, Su Xizhi hired a large cart for Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui to ride, while Zhan Chun and he rode on horsebacks. When they arrived at the next bigger town, Zhan Chun bought several sets of clothes for Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. After they changed clothes, they were transformed into totally different persons. Su and Zhan two people cheered loudly as they saw the change in appearances on this pair of children; the boy looked so handsome and the girl so pretty. Until that day, these two children had been travelling a long and arduous journey; after having good meals, they gradually turned into a pair of healthy children.

They went farther and farther to the west, the weather also turned colder and colder. Fortunately, they had Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun looking after them, so they had a pleasant journey. When they reached the western region, Kunlun Pai's influence was strongly felt; there was even less obstruction. Only, the yellow sand assaulted their faces and the cold wind penetrated their bones, making the journey hard to endure. In less than a day they had arrived at the Mount Kunlun's San Sheng Ao [three-sage cavity/valley]. Everywhere they looked, there was green grass like a carpet, with fruit trees and flower bushes. Su Xizhi and Zhang Wuji had never imagined that there would be such a beautiful place like this in this desolate desert, they were delighted. Turned out the San

Sheng Ao was surrounded on all sides by skyscraping mountain peaks, which protect it from the cold winds.

Ever since 'Kunlun San Sheng' [Three Sages of Kunlun] He Zudao, the successive Sect Leaders had spent considerable effort and meticulous care to conserve and tidy up this valley in the next seventy, eighty years. They dispatched the disciples as far as Jiang Nan [general term referring to the area south of Yangtze River] on the east, and Tianzhu [Indian subcontinent] on the west, to collect rare flowers and extraordinary trees to be cultivated this valley.

Zhan Chun took the three of them to 'Tie Qin Ju' [Iron Zither Residence], where Tie Qin Xiansheng, He Taichong took his residence. As they entered the door, she saw that a crowd of her martial brothers and sisters were gathered inside with worried looks on their faces. They only nodded their acknowledgement to her without saying anything. Zhan Chun shivered inwardly, she wondered what had happened. Pulling a younger martial sister aside, she asked, "Is Shifu home?" The female disciple had not yet replied when they heard He Taichong roar in violent rage coming from the inner chamber, "What a useless bunch! A useless bunch! [orig. fan tong - 'rice bucket'] Everything I ask you to do, nothing is done properly. What use do I have of these worthless [orig. nong bao - wrap cloth of a boil or a wound] disciples?" followed by an earth-shattering noise of a table being slapped.

Zhan Chun turned toward Su Xizhi and said, "Shifu is having a fit of temper, we'd better not bump against the nail, let's come back tomorrow."

"Is that Chun'er?" suddenly He Taichong called out, "What are you doing whispering sneakily? Have you severed the head of that little thief surnamed Su?"

Zhan Chun's face changed; she scrambled toward the inner chamber, kneeled down and kowtowed. "Disciple pays her respects to Shifu," she said.

He Taichong said, "I sent you to do something for me. How was it? How is that little thief surnamed Su?"

"That man surnamed Su is outside," Zhan Chun replied, "He comes to kowtow and apologize to Shifu. He said he did not realize his offense; or else he would not have watched Shifu practice the sword technique. But our School's sword technique is most refined and subtle that as soon as he looked, he knew it was a brilliant sword move, unparalleled in the world. However, he did not have any luck that it was all an unfathomable mystery to him; in the end, he did not have the slightest comprehension."

She had followed her master for quite some time; she knew he was extremely proud of his own martial art skill. Therefore, she said that Su Xizhi highly commended their school's martial art. If her master was happy, then he might forgive Su Xizhi.

Normally, this conceited He Taichong would take things lightly, but today his mood was greatly agitated. "Humph," he snorted, "You dealt with this matter well! Confine that surnamed Su in the stone building behind the mountain. I'll punish him later."

Zhan Chun realized he was still in a fit of temper, so she did not dare to press further. "Yes!" she said; then she asked, "Are Shimu [master wives] all well? Let me pay my respects inside."

Altogether, He Taichong had five wives and concubines. The one he loved most was the youngest, the fifth concubine.

Zhan Chun was thinking that in order to seek forgiveness for Su Xizhi, she would need this 'Wu Shimu' [Fifth Master Wife] to speak on their behalf.

He Taichong's face suddenly turned sorrowful, he heaved a deep sigh and said, "It's alright for you to see 'Wu Gu' [fifth (paternal) aunt], she has been very sick. It's good that you returned this quick so that you can still see her face."

Zhan Chun was startled. "Wu Gu is not feeling well?" she asked, "I wonder what kind of sickness?"

He Taichong sighed again. "If we know the sickness, then we can help her. We have had seven, eight supposedly famous doctors to examine her, but they can't even tell what sickness she is suffering. Her whole body swells; a woman as beautiful as flower and jade, swollen ... Ay, I don't want to talk about it ..." He repeatedly shook his head, and then he continued, "I have this many disciples, but all are just a useless bunch. I told them to Changbai Shan [Mount Changbai, Jilin province] to look for thousand-year ginseng. They have been gone for two months, yet nobody returned. I told them to look for Xue Lian [snow lotus (*Saussurea involucreata*)], or other miracle drug, yet everybody returned empty handed."

Zhan Chun mused, "Changbai Shan is ten thousand 'li' away from this place, how can they promptly return? Even after reaching Changbai Shan, they might not necessarily find the thousand-old ginseng. As for Xue Lian or other miracle drug, which can bring the dead back to life, it's not likely that we can find it even if we look for it our entire lives, much less in a short time? How can there be such convenience?" She knew her master loved this young concubine as much as he loved his own life. Now that she had fallen seriously ill, no wonder he vented his anger to others.

He Taichong continued, "I transmitted my internal energy through her 'chi' passage, but it did not make the least bit of difference. Humph, humph, if Wu Gu's life cannot be saved, I am going to kill all useless physicians in the world."

"Let disciple come and visit her," Zhan Chun said.

"Fine, let me come with you," He Taichong said.

The master and disciple went together to the Fifth Aunt's chamber. As soon as Zhan Chun walked through the door, her nostrils were assaulted by strong odor of medicine. Upon opening the mosquito net, she saw the Fifth Aunt's face was swollen like Zhu Bajie [the pig-face character in the Journey to the West]; her eyes were buried deep underneath the swollen flesh that she almost could not open her eyes. Her breathing was so heavy that it sounded like the bellows a blacksmith. The Fifth Aunt was originally a beautiful woman; He Taichong would not be this infatuated with her otherwise. However, because of the illness she had turned into an ugly woman. Zhan Chun could not help but heave a deep sigh.

"Call those useless doctors to examine her again," He Taichong said. The old female servant who was attending to her needs complied and went out the room. Soon afterwards, they heard the clinking noise of iron chains as seven doctors walked in. The legs of these seven men were chained together. Their appearance looked haggard and their faces were pitiful.

These seven men were famous physicians from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu regions. They were half-invited, half-kidnapped by He Taichong's disciples. But these seven famous doctors did not share the same opinion; some said she was bloated, some said she was possessed by evil spirit.

They all wrote prescriptions, but after taking the prescribed medicine, the Fifth Aunt condition was no different that her condition on the first day.

In his rage, He Taichong had these seven famous physicians locked up, saying that if the Fifth Aunt was not cured, these seven useless doctors (by this time, the 'famous doctors' had turned into 'useless doctors') would accompany her to the grave. The seven doctors had used up their entire skill, but the Fifth Aunt's swelling was growing bigger and bigger. They knew their lives were at stake, but each time they did the examination together, these seven doctors were always arguing loudly with each other. Each one criticizing the other six, saying that the Fifth Aunt's worsened condition was because of the others' mistake, it had nothing to do with him.

This time was no different; as soon as they entered the room and examined her pulse, they started bickering with each other. He Taichong was anxious and enraged; he roared his curses that the seven famous or useless doctors' voices were drowned.

Zhan Chun's mind suddenly clicked. "Shifu," she said, "I brought a doctor from Henan. Although his age is young, his skill is somewhat superior to these doctors."

"Why didn't you say so?" He Taichong was delighted, "Quickly invite him, quickly invite him!"

Each time the famous doctor arrived, he always treated him with an utmost respect; but he would not be polite anymore as soon as the 'famous doctor' turned into a 'useless doctor'.

Zhan Chun quickly returned to the hall and took Zhang Wuji inside. As soon as Zhang Wuji saw He Taichong, he recognized him as one of the crowd who forced his parents to

their death on Mount Wudang a few years ago; he could not refrain from feeling hatred and resentment. However, it had been four, five years since then, that Zhang Wuji's face and stature had undergone huge changes. He Taichong did not recognize Zhang Wuji. He only saw a fourteen, maybe fifteen years old teenager, who did not kneel down and kowtow to him.

He Taichong's eyes narrowed; his face turned cold, and he no longer took any notice of Zhang Wuji. "Where is that doctor you were talking about?" he asked Zhan Chun.

"This Xiao Xiongdi is the doctor," Zhan Chun said, "He has an exquisite medical knowledge, I am sure his skill surpasses many famous doctors."

How could He Taichong believe her? "Nonsense, nonsense!" he said.

Zhan Chun said, "Disciple was hit by the blue 'tuo luo' flower poison, he was the one who cure me."

He Taichong was astonished, he thought, "Without our School's antidote, anybody who got hit by the blue 'tuo luo' flower poison would certainly die. If this kid can cure it, he must be some kind of freak." Looking up and down to size up Zhang Wuji, he asked, "Young man, do you really know how to treat illness?"

Recalling his parents' tragic death, actually Zhang Wuji hated He Taichong to his bones, however, by nature, it was difficult for him to hold a grudge, otherwise, he would not easily treat Jian Jie and the others, and he would not treat Zhan Chun of Kunlun Pai. As he heard He Taichong's rude question this time, although he was not happy, he still nodded his head.

When Zhang Wuji entered the room, he had already smelled strange odor. After a while, he felt the odor was sometimes growing stronger, another time the odor was dispersing. He felt the odor was very unusual. He walked toward the Fifth Aunt's bed and examined her face. He pressed the wrists of her both hands to check her pulse. Suddenly he took out a golden needle from his pocket and pricked it into her face which was swollen as big as a pumpkin.

He Taichong was shocked. "What are you doing?" he barked. As he lifted up his hand to grab Zhang Wuji, Zhang Wuji had already pulled the needle out, but there was no blood coming out from the Fifth Aunt's face. He Taichong's five fingers were less than half a foot from Zhang Wuji's back when he stopped. He saw that Zhang Wuji brought the needle to his nose and then nodded his head.

A ray of hope grew in He Taichong's heart. "Young ... Xiao Xiongdi," he said, "Can her illness be cured?" For a leader of a major sect to unexpectedly call Zhang Wuji 'Xiao Xiongdi' [little brother], he could be considered very polite.

Zhang Wuji did not answer. He crawled underneath the Fifth Aunt's bed for a while, and then he opened the bedroom window and looked at the flower garden outside. Suddenly he jumped out the window and took a stroll in the garden. He Taichong was very fond of the Fifth Aunt, so he had all kinds of rare flowers and plants grew outside her window. When he saw Zhang Wuji was acting strange, he felt as if his heart was frying in oil. He was hoping that Zhang Wuji would immediately write a prescription and cure the Fifth Aunt strange illness, but he was strolling leisurely in the flower garden instead; how could he not be angry? But when his hands and feet were bound without him able to do anything and suddenly he saw the light at the end of the tunnel, he

was forced to suppress his anger. Still, his face turned dark and his breathing was getting faster.

He observed that Zhang Wuji looked at the flowers and plants for a while and then he nodded his head as if he understood something. Upon returning to the room, Zhang Wuji said, "Her illness can be cured, but I don't want to cure her. Miss Zhan, I am leaving."

"Zhang Xiongdi," Zhan Chun said, "If you heal the Fifth Aunt, our Kunlun Pai, from top to bottom, will be greatly indebted to you. I must certainly ask you to heal her."

Pointing his finger to He Taichong, Zhang Wuji said, "This Tie Qin Xiansheng took part in forcing the death of my father and mother; why should I save his family's life?"

He Taichong was shocked. "Xiao Xiongdi," he asked, "What is your honorable surname? Who are your respected father and mother?"

"My surname is Zhang," Zhang Wuji replied, "My departed father was the fifth disciple of Wudang Pai."

He Taichong's heart turned cold. "Turns out he is Zhang Cuishan's son," he mused, "Wudang Pai is truly good; he learned from his family school, I guess his skill must be good." Immediately he sighed in grief and said, "Zhang Xiongdi, when your respected father was still alive, he and I [orig. 'zaixia' - under, the humble one] were good friends. When he committed suicide, I did not stop grieving over his death ..." In order to save his beloved concubine's life, he did not hesitate to flatter without any reservation.

Zhan Chun also helped her master propagating the lie, "After your father and mother died, Shifu wept bitterly several

times. He often told us, the disciples, that your respected father was his most cherished friend he had his entire life. Zhang Xiongdi, why didn't you tell me earlier? If I knew you are Zhang Wu Xia's [fifth hero] son, I would have treated you with more respect."

Zhang Wuji was half-believing and half-doubting, but since he did not easily hold any grudge, he said, "Madame has not contacted some strange disease; she is suffering from the snake venom of 'Jin Yin Xue She' [gold and silver blood snakes]."

"Jin Yin Xue She?" He Taichong and Zhan Chun exclaimed together.

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "I have never seen this kind of vipers myself, but Madame's cheeks are swollen, and when I pricked it with the golden needle, the needle smelled like the sandalwood fragrance. Mr. He, please take a look at Madame's feet, the tips of her ten toes may have tiny bite marks."

He Taichong busily tore open the cotton-wadded quilt covering the Fifth Aunt's body. When he examined her toes carefully, indeed he saw several purplish black bite marks on all her toes. The marks were as tiny as grains of rice; if he did not intentionally look for the marks, he would easily miss them.

As soon as He Taichong saw the marks, his confidence in Zhang Wuji's skill increased ten-folds. He said, "That's right, that's right, there are indeed bite marks on each toes. Xiao Xiongdi is very intelligent, very intelligent. Since Xiao Xiongdi knows the cause, you must also know how to treat it. After Concubine is healed, I will certainly reward you handsomely." Turning toward the seven physicians, he

sternly said, "What 'cold' or 'possessed by evil spirit', 'devoid of Yang' or 'lack of Yin'? Rubbish! How come you, seven rice buckets, cannot see the bite marks on her toes?" Although he was swearing and cursing, his tone was actually jubilant.

"Madame's illness is very peculiar," Zhang Wuji said, "It's not surprising that they do not know the cause. Please let them go home."

"Very well, very well!" He Taichong laughed, "Xiao Xiongdi honors us with your presence; if we keep these useless doctors in here, won't they annoy us to our deaths? Chun'er, give each of them one hundred 'liang' [tael], let them go home."

Narrowly escaped death, the seven physicians were overjoyed. They left in a hurry, for fear that Zhang Wuji's medical technique was not effective, then He Taichong would lock this 'little useless doctor' together with them, and would bury eight big and little 'useless doctors' together with the beloved concubine.

"Please ask the servant lady to move Madame's bed," Zhang Wuji ordered, "There is a hole underneath the bed from which the Jin Yin Xue snakes coming in and out of their lair."

He Taichong did not wait for the servant lady; grabbing the bed's leg with his right hand, he single-handedly pulled the bed away, along with the Madame on it. Sure enough, he saw a small hole underneath the bed. Unable to contain his delight and his anger, he called out, "Quickly get some sulfur and fire over here! Fumigate the vipers, cut them into thousand cuts and ten-thousand pieces!"

Zhang Wuji shook his hand. "Certainly not! Certainly not! Madame was hit by snake venom, she needs these two

snakes to heal. If you kill the snakes, Madame will never recover.”

“So be it,” He Taichong said, “What shall we do, then? Please advice.” Ever since his master died, it was the very first time he had uttered these two words ‘please advice’ again.

Zhang Wuji pointed toward the flower garden outside the window. “Mr. He,” he said, “Your honorable wife’s illness stems from those eight ‘ling zhi lan’ [lingzhi orchid] trees in that garden.”

“Is that what’s it called? Lingzhi Orchid?” He Taichong asked, “I did not know its name. A friend of mine knew my affection of flowers and plants, he brought those eight orchid trees from the western region for me. When the flowers bloom, they indeed emit sweet smelling fragrance, like that of sandalwood. The color of the petals is also extremely delicate and beautiful. I have never thought it is the source of the disaster.”

Zhang Wuji said, “According to the book, the root of the Lingzhi Orchid is ball-shaped, fiery red in color, with deadly poison inside. Why don’t we dig it out to see whether it is true?”

By this time, the other disciples had heard about the young doctor who was going to treat the Fifth Master-wife’s strange illness. The male disciples felt it was inappropriate for them to enter the room, so only Zhan Chun and the other female disciples, six in total, were standing on the side. Hearing Zhang Wuji’s order, two female disciples quickly fetched iron shovels and began digging around the root of one of the Lingzhi Orchid tree. As expected, they saw the fiery red ball-shaped root. The disciples heard Zhang Wuji when said that the root contained deadly poison; how could they dare to

touch it?

Zhang Wuji said, "Please dig all eight of the ball-shaped roots for me and place them in a clay pot. Put eight chicken eggs and a bowl of chicken blood, and mince everything into mush. Be careful in mixing the concoction, make sure nothing splashes onto your flesh."

Zhan Chun complied; she took two younger disciples to do his order. Zhang Wuji also wanted two bamboo tubes, about a foot long each, and a bamboo stick, which he set aside.

Soon afterwards, the Lingzhi Orchid's ball roots had been mashed into a thick paste. Zhang Wuji applied the paste on the floor, making a circle, but he left a gap about two 'cun' wide [1 cun is approximately 1 inch].

"Soon you will see an unusual thing; do not make any noise," Zhang Wuji said, "If the vipers are frightened, they will disappear without any trace. All of you must take licorice root and cotton; squeeze it into your nostrils."

Everybody followed his order at once. Zhang Wuji also stopped his nostrils then he took some kindling material and burned the Lingzhi Orchid's leaf he placed in front of the snake hole.

Less than the time to drink a cup of tea later, a little snake head appeared from the small hole. The snake's body was blood red. There was a golden crown-like flesh on its head. The snake slowly crawled out. Unexpectedly, this snake had four legs. Its length was approximately eight 'cun'. Behind this snake, there was another snake crawling out of the hole. The second snake was a little shorter, but it looked exactly like the first snake, except the crown on its head was silver in color.

Seeing these two strange snakes, He Taichong and the others held their breath; nobody dared to make any noise. It goes without saying that this kind of strange snake must be deadly venomous, but these people were martial art experts, they were not afraid of the snakes. However, if the snakes were scared away, the Madame's foul disease would be difficult to cure.

They saw the two snakes were extending their tongues to lick each other's back; they looked very affectionate, leaning and snuggling on each other, while crawling slowly to enter the Lingzhi Orchid paste circle.

Zhang Wuji quickly placed one bamboo tube outside the circle's gap, while using the bamboo stick he gently pushed the tail of the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake moved in a lightning speed; everybody only saw a flash of silver lightning and the snake had already entered the tube. The golden-crowned blood snake also wanted to follow in, but the bamboo tube was too small; it could contain only one snake. As the golden-crowned blood snake was unable to enter, it produced an anxious 'hu, hu' sound.

With the bamboo stick, Zhang Wuji pushed the other bamboo tube in front of the golden-crowned blood snake. The snake also entered the tube. Zhang Wuji quickly took a wooden cork and closed the bamboo tube opening.

From the time the pair of snakes came out of the hole, everybody had been nervously holding their breath in trepidation. When Zhang Wuji finally closed the bamboo tubes with wooden corks, these people exhaled together as if by prior agreement.

Zhang Wuji said, "Please take several buckets of hot water

and scrub the floor clean. We must not have any Lingzhi Orchid's poison remain in here."

The six female disciples rushed into the kitchen to boil some water. They returned a short while later and promptly washed the floor clean.

Zhang Wuji instructed them to shut the doors and windows tight, also for them to fetch some 'xiong huang' [realgar], 'ming fan' [potassium alum], 'dai huang' [Chinese rhubarb], 'gan cao' [licorice], and other drug ingredients, and ground them into powder, mixed with quicklime [Calcium Oxide]. He poured the mixture into the bamboo tube containing the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake immediately produced a 'hu hu' sound, which was immediately responded by the golden-crowned snake in the other bamboo tube. Zhang Wuji took the wooden cork out. The golden-crowned snake went out of the tube and crawled anxiously around the tube containing the silver-crowned snake. Suddenly it dashed toward the bed and disappeared underneath Fifth Aunt's cotton quilt.

"Ah!" He Taichong was extremely shocked. Zhang Wuji shook his hand, and then gently uncovered the cotton quilt. They saw that the golden-crowned snake was biting the middle toe of the Fifth Aunt's left foot.

Zhang Wuji's face lit up as he said in a low voice, "The Jin Yin Xue snakes' venom inside Madame's body is currently being sucked out by this snake."

About half the time needed to burn an incense stick later, the snake's body grew several times its original size; the golden crown on its head also grew brighter. Zhang Wuji partly opened the wooden cork containing the silver-crowned snake. The golden-crowned snake leaped down from the bed

and went to the bamboo tube. It spat the poisonous blood from its mouth to feed the silver snake.

"That's enough," Zhang Wuji said, "We'll draw the poison out twice daily, plus I am going to write a prescription to rapidly reduce the swelling, within ten days she will recover completely."

He Taichong was ecstatic. He invited Zhang Wuji into his study and said, "Xiao Xiongdi is extremely skillful. Would you advice me of what is going on?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "According to the book, this pair of golden-crowned and silver-crowned snakes occupies number 47 in the world in term of its toxicity, so their venom cannot be considered very fierce. However, there is one singular characteristic: they feed on poisons; 'pi shuang' [arsenic frost], 'he ding hong' [lit. red top of a crane], 'kong que dan' [peacock gall bladder], 'zhen jiu' [wine made of feathers of legendary bird], and so on, no exception. Lingzhi Orchid grew in the flower garden outside Madame's window. This Lingzhi Orchid's toxicity is truly fierce; it had unexpectedly drawn the pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes."

He Taichong nodded. "So that's how it is," he said.

Zhang Wuji said, "Jin Yin Xue snakes always live in pairs, male and female. Just now, I used realgar and other chemicals to burn the silver-crowned female snake. To save its mate, the male golden-crowned snake absorbed the poisonous blood from Madame's toe and feed it to her. Hereafter I am going to burn the male snake. The female snake will definitely drew some more poisonous blood. By repeating this procedure several times, the venom inside Madame's body can be totally eradicated."

Speaking to this point, he remembered something. "Why did the snakes bite Madame's toes in the first place?" he mused, "There must be another reason." After thinking for a while without finding any satisfactory answer, he dropped the matter out of his mind.

That very same day He Taichong held a banquet at the inner hall to entertain Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Zhang Wuji thought that since Yang Buhui was Ji Xiaofu's illegitimate daughter, he did not want to implicate Emei Pai's reputation; thereupon, when He Taichong inquired of her, he gave him a vague answer without further explanation.

A few days later, the swelling on the Fifth Aunt subsided, her spirit recovered, she was able to eat and drink. Zhang Wuji bid his farewell, but He Taichong earnestly asked him to stay, for fear that his beloved concubine's illness would return.

Toward the afternoon of the tenth day, the swelling on the Fifth Aunt had completely disappeared. The Fifth Aunt prepared an exquisite banquet complete with fine wine as her way of saying thanks to Zhang Wuji. She also invited Zhan Chun to accompany the guests.

Although the Fifth Aunt's countenance was still thin and pallid, her beauty had returned, making He Taichong utterly delighted. Seeing her master was in a very good mood, Zhan Chun implored him to take Su Xizhi as his disciple.

He Taichong roared in laughter. "Chun'er," he said, "Your 'removing-the-firewood-from-under-the-pot' ruse is very well executed. If I accepted this surnamed Su fellow, then I might pass on the 'Kunlun Liang Yi Jian' sword technique to him. In that case, what harm would it bring if he has previously peeked one time?"

"Shifu," Zhan Chun laughed, "If not because this surnamed Su fellow peeking your sword practice, disciple would not have left to pursue him, and thus would not come across Brother Zhang. No doubt that Shifu and Wu Gu's good fortune have always flooded the heavens, and that Brother Zhang's medical skill is brilliant; but come to think about it, this fellow surnamed Su also has a tiny bit of contribution."

The Fifth Aunt said to He Taichong, "You have received these many disciples, in the end, nobody was able to help you in your distress, except Miss Zhan who has rendered you a great service. Since Miss Zhan has her heart set on that fellow, I am sure he must have something good in him. Why don't you accept one more disciple? Who knows, perhaps in the future he will be your most capable disciple."

He Taichong had always listened to his most beloved concubine, thereupon he said, "Very well, I will accept him on one condition."

"What is it?" the Fifth Aunt asked.

With a straight face He Taichong said, "Upon entering my school, he must keep his mind on his lessons, he must not have any wishful thinking toward Chun'er, thinking about taking her as his wife, for example. I will strictly enforce this one condition."

Zhan Chun blushed and hang her head low. The Fifth Aunt giggled and said, "Aiyo, as the Shifu, you must set a good example. You yourself have three wives and four concubines, and yet you forbid your disciple to marry?"

He Taichong was only teasing Zhan Chun. He broke out in laughter and said, "Let's drink! Let's drink!"

A young maid came in, carrying a wooden tray in his hands, with a pot of wine on the tray. She came in front of the banquet table and poured wine for everybody. The wine was thick and rather sticky, golden yellow in color, its sweet aroma assailed their nostrils.

"Zhang Xiongdi," He Taichong said, "This wine is our mountain's famous product, it is fermented from the 'hu po mi li' [lit. amber honey pear] grown on the snowy peak. It is called 'hu po mi li jiu' [amber honey pear wine]. You won't find it outside this area. You should not drink only a little of it." While in his mind he pondered, "How can I swindle him into spilling out the Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-mane lion king] Xie Xun's whereabouts? I must plan it carefully, cannot have the slightest bit of rashness."

Actually, Zhang Wuji was not a wine-drinker, but since the sweet aroma of the 'hu po mi li jiu' was flooding his brain, he took the cup with both hands. He had just brought the cup to his lips when the pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes he kept in his pocket was calling out, 'hu hu hu'. Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred. "We must not drink this wine," he called out.

Everybody was startled and put down the wine cups at once. From his pocket Zhang Wuji took the bamboo tubes out and released the golden-crowned blood snake. The snake crawled toward the wine cup and stretching out its neck, it sucked the wine dry. Zhang Wuji returned the snake into the bamboo tube, and then released the female silver-crowned blood snake to also drink a cup. This pair of snakes did not want to be separated from each other, so if only either the male or the female was released, they would not go far and were very tame. However, if both of them were released at the same time, not only it would be difficult to return them into the bamboo tubes, they might even bite.

The Fifth Aunt laughed and said, "Xiao Xiongdi, your pair of snakes can drink wine. They are so amusing."

Zhang Wuji said, "Could you have someone bring in a dog or a cat, please?"

"Yes," the young maid replied and turned around to leave the room.

Zhang Wuji said, "Would this Jiejie [elder sister] wait here and not go? Let someone else get the cat or the dog."

A short while later, a servant came in pulling a yellow dog. Zhang Wuji took the cup of wine in front of He Taichong and poured it into the yellow dog's mouth. The yellow dog barked sadly several times, and then died with blood flowing from all its seven orifices.

The Fifth Aunt was so frightened that her entire body trembled. "The wine is poisonous ... who ... who wants to kill us? Zhang Xiongdi, how did you know?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Jin Yin Xue snakes feed on poison. When they smelled the poison in the wine, they cried out happily."

He Taichong's face turned pale; he grabbed the young maid's wrist and said in low voice, "Who told you to deliver this poisonous wine to us?"

The young maid was shocked and scared out of her wits. In a trembling voice she stammered, "I ... I didn't know it was ... it was poisonous ... I took it from the kitchen ..."

"Whom did you meet on the way from the kitchen to this room?" He Taichong asked.

The young maid replied, "I saw Xing Fang at the corridor, she stopped me to talk to me, she opened the wine pot to smell its aroma."

He Taichong, the Fifth Aunt and Zhan Chun looked at each other with fear on their faces. Turned out that Xing Fang was the trusted maid of He Taichong's first wife.

"Mr. He," Zhang Wuji said, "I was reluctant to say it, although I have pondered about it in my heart. Think about it, why did this pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes bite Madame's toes in the first place, so that the snake venom entered into her system? Evidently, Madame has already been hit by a slow poison; her blood has already contained poison. This was what attracted the Jin Yin Xue snakes. I am afraid the person who poisoned Madame is the same person who put poison in our wine today."

He Taichong had not replied when suddenly the curtain on the doorway was opened and a shadow flashed by. Zhang Wuji felt a severe pain on the chest below his breasts as his acupoints were sealed.

A sharp voice said, "You are absolutely right, I was the one who put poison!"

They saw a middle-aged woman came in. She was big and tall in stature, the hair on her head was graying, her eyes revealed a strong character, there were wrinkles in between her eyebrows. The woman said to He Taichong, "I put centipede venom in the wine, what are you going to do?"

The Fifth Aunt's face showed fear; she stood up at once and respectfully bowed, "Taitai! [Madame]" she called out. Turned out this big and tall woman was He Taichong's first wife, Ban Shuxian, who was originally his older martial sister.

Seeing his wife burst into the room, He Taichong was silent, he only snorted once. Ban Shuxian said, "I am asking you: I put the poison in the wine. What are you going to do?"

He Taichong said, "You don't like this young man, that's fine with me. But you just did this without distinguishing right from wrong. Supposing the wine entered my belly, how can that be good?"

Ban Shuxian indignantly said, "There is no good person in here! If I can torment everybody to death, it is good for me."

She took the wine pot and shook it lightly. The wine splashed inside the pot; apparently, the pot was still almost full. She poured a cup of wine and placed it in front of He Taichong. "I was thinking of killing all five of you," she said, "But since this kid has discovered my plan, I am willing to spare four of you. I don't care who will drink this cup of wine. Lao Gui [old ghost], you decide." While saying that, 'shua!' she drew her sword.

Ban Shuxian was Kunlun Pai's most illustrious character. She was two years older than He Taichong, and she entered their school earlier, her martial art skill was not inferior to He Taichong. When he was young, He Taichong was a handsome man, so he won the favor of this older martial sister. Their master, Bai Luzi, died in a battle against a Ming Cult expert, and did not leave any will. As a result, the numerous disciples fought over the Sect Leader position, nobody was willing to yield to anybody else. Ban Shuxian threw her full support behind He Taichong. With their combined effort, their power increased greatly. Although the other martial brothers each desired a selfish gain, nobody was able to challenge them. In the end, He Taichong took over the Sect Leader position. Out of his indebtedness, he took this older martial

sister as his wife.

As they grew older, due to the difference in their ages, Ban Shuxian appeared to be more than ten years older to He Taichong. Using the pretext of not having a male offspring, He Taichong took a concubine. Because of her dozens of years of prestige and his own conscience - he knew he was at fault, He Taichong held this Shijie [older martial sister] in very high regard. However, although he was afraid of her, he kept taking concubine after concubine. Only, each time he took a new concubine, his fear toward his first wife also increased by 30%.

At this time, as he saw his wife put a poisoned wine in front of him, it had never occurred to him to disobey his wife's order. He thought, "Certainly I can't drink it. Wu Gu and Chun'er also cannot drink it. Zhang Wuji is the benefactor who saved our lives. Only this baby girl does not have any relation with us." Thereupon he stood up and handed the wine cup to Yang Buhui, saying, "Child, drink this cup of wine."

Yang Buhui was terrified; she had just witnessed how a large yellow dog drank a cup of poisoned wine and died violently; how could she dare to drink the wine? Crying, she said, "I don't want to drink, I don't want to drink."

He Taichong grabbed the clothes on her chest and was about to force her. Zhang Wuji coldly said, "Let me drink it."

He Taichong felt a pang of regret, but he did not open his mouth at all. Ban Shuxian was actually jealous and wanted to poison He Taichong's most beloved concubine, the Fifth Aunt. Her scheme was doing so well until Zhang Wuji suddenly appeared and thwarted her plan; therefore, she loathed this young man. With a cold voice she said, "You are a crafty

young man, perhaps you have taken the antidote. If you are going to drink, then one cup is not enough, you must drink the entire poisonous wine pot dry."

Zhang Wuji looked at He Taichong, hoping he would say something on his behalf, who would have thought that He Taichong was looking down and did not utter a single word. Zhan Chun and the Fifth Aunt did not dare to speak, for fear that as soon as they opened their mouth, Ban Shuxian might turn her anger to them, and then this almost full pot of poisonous wine would be poured into their own mouths.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned icy-cold, he said in his heart, "These several people's lives were saved by me, but now that I am facing a disaster, they indeed only watch with folded arms, they don't even utter half a word on my behalf."

"Miss Zhan," he said, "After I die, please take this little sister to Zuo Wang Peak where her father is. Would you do that?"

Zhan Chun looked at her master. He Taichong nodded. Thereupon Zhan Chun said, "Very well, I will take her there." However, in her heart she thought, "Kunlun Mountains spread out for thousands of 'li', how do I know where the Zuo Wang Peak is?"

Zhang Wuji could hear that she said those words half-heartedly, obviously she did not have the least bit of sincerity; he knew that these people were hypocritical bunch, so it would not do any good to speak further. With a cold laugh he said, "Kunlun Pai is one of the prestigious school in the Wulin world, turns out it is just like this. Mr. He, get the wine for me!"

He Taichong was indignant to hear him, so he thought the sooner he got rid of Zhang Wuji the better, his wife's anger

would be suppressed sooner, and thus she would not think of any other treacherous scheme to kill the Fifth Aunt. To him, it was a desperate situation; he had no time to worry about Xie Xun's whereabouts. Therefore, he fetched the almost full pot of poisonous wine and poured it into Zhang Wuji's mouth.

Yang Buhui hugged Zhang Wuji tight while wailing loudly.

Ban Shuxian laughed coldly and said, "Even if your medical skill is more exquisite, I am going to make sure that you will not be able to save yourself." Stretching out her hand, her fingers deftly sealed several acupoints on Zhang Wuji's shoulder, back, waist and sides. Using the end of her sword's hilt, she also sealed two major acupoints on He Taichong, Zhan Chun, the Fifth Aunt and Yang Buhui's bodies. She said, "I'll be back four hours later to release you." When she sealed their acupoints, He Taichong, Zhan Chun, and the others did not move; they did not even dare to evade.

Ban Shuxian turned toward the servants waiting on the side, "Out!" she said. She went out the room last and closed the door while laughing coldly all the way out.

As soon as the poisonous wine entered his stomach, Zhang Wuji felt excruciating pain deep inside his belly. When Ban Shuxian left the room, he thought, "Now that you left, I may not necessarily die." Suppressing the pain, he circulated his 'chi' using the technique taught by Xie Xun. First, he freed the sealed the acupoints on his body, and then he pulled several strands of his own hair and tickled his throat. 'Wah!' he vomited about 80, 90% of the poisonous wine inside his stomach.

He Taichong, Zhan Chun, and the others were utterly amazed seeing how he was able to move even after his acupoints were sealed. He Taichong wanted to reach out and stop him,

but unfortunately, his acupoints were also sealed by his own wife. His superior martial art skill was useless at this time, it only increased his anxiety.

Zhang Wuji was still hurting inside, but no matter how hard he tried, there was simply nothing else he could vomit out of his stomach. He thought the best course of action right now was to try to escape from this dangerous place and then find a way to repel the poison. Thereupon he reached out to unseal Yang Buhui's acupoints. To his surprise, however, Ban Shuxian's acupoint sealing technique was unique, Zhang Wuji was unable to unseal the acupoints. In this pressing moment, he had no time to try over various acupoint unsealing techniques, thereupon he carried her toward the window. Pushing the window pane outward, he looked around and after making sure there was nobody outside, he put Yang Buhui down outside the window.

If He Taichong used his internal energy [orig. 'zhen qi' - true/real 'chi'] to force the acupoints open, he might be able to do it within a little more than an hour; however, Zhang Wuji was about to escape. If he waited until his wife returned and inquired, he would be in trouble; not to mention this Wudang Pai kid was able to escape from Kunlun Pai's San Sheng Tang [three-saint hall] unarmed [orig. 'chi shou kong quan' - empty hand, empty fist]. If his ungrateful act and hypocritical deeds were spread out in Jianghu, how could he save his face as the grand master of a prestigious sect? No matter what, he simply must kill him. Therefore, he took a deep breath, ready to shout, to warn his wife.

Zhang Wuji had anticipated this, so he took a black pill from his pocket and stuffed it inside the Fifth Aunt's mouth, saying, "This is the 'jiu pi wan' [lit. turtle-dove arsenic pill]. After twenty-four hour, the Fifth Madame will die with broken intestines and split heart. I am going to put the antidote on a

big tree thirty 'li' from here. You will see the mark. Six hours later, Mr. He can send someone to fetch the medicine. If by any chance I am captured on my way out and am put to death, there will be one person accompanying me."

This abrupt turn of events took He Taichong by surprise; he hesitated a moment before saying in a low voice, "Xiao Xiongdi, although my San Sheng Tang is not a dragon pool or a tiger lair, I doubt two children like you will be able to break through."

Zhang Wuji knew he was not bluffing. He laughed coldly and said, "But the toxicity of the 'jiu pi wan' the Fifth Madame took, no one else can neutralize it other than I."

"Alright," He Taichong said, "You unseal my acupoints, I will personally escort you out."

He Taichong's sealed acupoints were 'feng chi' and 'jing men' ['wind reservoir' and 'capital (city) gate']. Zhang Wuji massaged his 'tian zhu', 'huan tiao', 'da zhui', 'shang qu' [lit. sky pillar, jumping the hoop, big spine, and crooked quotient], several acupoints for a moment, but it hardly gave him the desired effect. In their hearts, the two of them admired one another.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Their Kunlun Pai's acupoint sealing technique is truly good. Mr. Hu had taught me seven different acupoint unsealing techniques, but all are useless against the sealed acupoints on his body."

He Taichong thought, "Surprisingly this kid knows these many acupoint unsealing techniques, every technique is marvelous, truly deserving my admiration. Shijie [martial (older) sister] clearly sealed seven, eight of his acupoints, yet somehow she failed to control him? For the last several years

the name of Wudang Pai shook the Jianghu. This LaoDao [Ol' Taoist] Zhang Sanfeng' ability is unreachable. On the Mount Wudang that day, I was lucky I did not fight Wudang Pai. Otherwise, if they unleashed their anger, I would have fallen with head and face in the mud. He is only a small child, yet he is this good. The older and bigger ones must be ten times better than he is."

He did not know that Zhang Wuji learned acupoint sealing technique from Xie Xun and the acupoint unsealing technique from Hu Qingniu. Wudang Pai indeed gave him the solid foundation with its prestige that shook the Wulin world, however, these two special skills of Zhang Wuji's had nothing to do with Wudang Pai.

Seeing Zhang Wuji failed to unseal his acupoints, He Taichong had an idea, "Take that teapot and give me a mouthful of tea," he said.

Zhang Wuji did not know why he suddenly wanted to drink tea at a moment like this, but knowing that he cared too much about his beloved concubine's life, he believed He Taichong would not dare to do any trick against him. Thereupon he took the teapot and let him drink some tea.

He Taichong slowly sipped a mouthful of tea, but he did not swallow it. Aiming toward his own 'qing leng yuan' [lit. clear and cold abyss] on the crook of his elbow, he exerted his strength and blew a water dart. With 'chi, chi!' sound, the acupoint on his hand was immediately unsealed.

Upon his arrival at the San Sheng Tang, Zhang Wuji saw right away how He Taichong threw a fit of temper because of the Fifth Aunt's illness, that he was a man who fears his wife and pampers his concubine, that he was a weak and indecisive man. Right now, as he witnessed He Taichong's skill, he could

not restrain from being flabbergasted. "This Kunlun Pai Zhang Men's [Sect Leader] martial art skill is truly profound; I underestimated him before. Apparently, his skill level is not below those of Yu Er Shibo [second martial (older) uncle], Jin Hua Popo and Mijue Shitai. I thought he was a timid and careless. I forgot the fact that he is the Kunlun Pai Zhang Men, a position which not many people would be able to reach. If this water dart was shot to my face or my chest, I would have died instantly."

He Taichong turned his right hand several times and then he unsealed his own legs' acupoints. "Give the antidote first," he said, "Then I will escort you safely out the valley."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. He Taichong anxiously said, "I am the Kunlun Zhang Men, do you think I will break my promise to a child like you? Won't it be bad if the poison flares-up?"

Zhang Wuji said, "The poison will not flare-up."

"Alright," He Taichong sighed, "Let us go out quietly."

The two of them jumped out the window. He Taichong reached out and lightly brushed Yang Buhui's back with his fingers. Her acupoints were immediately unsealed; his hand was incomparably light and swift. Zhang Wuji was extremely impressed, and his face showed his deep respect. He Taichong understood his feelings, he smiled slightly. With each hand holding one child, he circled toward the flower garden behind the San Sheng Tang, and went out through the side door.

Altogether, there were nine entryways around the San Sheng Tang. Other than the side door of the rear garden, all the passages were winding around garden paths, and some lead

into various pavilions and halls. Zhang Wuji saw endless rows of rooms with countless doors. If He Taichong did not lead them, he knew he would be lost for sure. Even without any Kunlun disciple stopping them, they might not necessarily be able to escape out.

As soon as they left the San Sheng Tang, He Taichong grabbed Yang Buhui and carried her in his right arm while pulling Zhang Wuji with his left hand. Unleashing his 'qing gong', He Taichong took them toward the northwest. Taken by He Taichong, Zhang Wuji felt they were lightly floating on the ground; each jump covered a distance of more than a 'zhang' [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters]. The wind sounded so loud in his ears; it was as if they were flying high up in the sky. His respect towards He Taichong and Kunlun Pai grew by several points.

Zhang Wuji realized that the poison in his stomach had not been completely eradicated, so he took two detoxifier pills from his pocket and felt relieved after the pills entered his belly.

While they were still rushing ahead, suddenly they heard a woman's voice calling, "He Taichong ... He Taichong ... stop ..." This voice was riding on the wind; it sounded very far, yet also sounded as if the speaker was right next to them. It was precisely Ban Shuxian's voice.

He Taichong hesitated, but in the end he stopped. He said with a sigh, "Xiao Xiongdi, the two of you better go quickly. She is my wife, I cannot escort you any further."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This man is actually very decent toward us." Thereupon he said, "Mr. He, you can return now. The pill I gave the Fifth Madame is not poison; it is not 'Jiu Pi Wan' at all, it is only 'sang bei wan' [mulberry tree shell pill]

to moist the throat and suppress coughing. A few days ago Buhui Meimei [younger sister] was coughing, so I made some for her. I still have several pills left and unavoidably I scared you."

He Taichong was stunned, angry, but also relieved. "So it really is not poison?" he roared.

"I was the one who brought the Fifth Madame back to life," Zhang Wuji said, "How could I poison her?"

In the meantime, Ban Shuxian did not stop calling, "He Taichong ... He Taichong ... Are you done running away?" Her voice was somewhat closer.

He Taichong took Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui away because he was afraid his beloved concubine's poisoning might be incurable, but now he knew for certain that the Fifth Aunt was not poisoned at all. Turned out he had fallen under this kid's trick. His anger rose uncontrollably. 'Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!' four times on his ears left and right, Zhang Wuji's cheeks were swollen and blood dripping down from his mouth.

Zhang Wuji deeply regretted his own action, "I was muddle-headed. Why would I tell him the truth?" he mused, "Now Buhui Meimei and I will lose our lives."

Seeing He Taichong's fifth strike was about to arrive, hastily he launched the 'dao qi long' [riding a dragon upside-down] from the Wudang 'chang quan' [long fist] style, in which his palm met the approaching enemy. If this stance was launched by Yu Lianzhou or his peers, the raw power would be unlimited, but Zhang Wuji's mastery of this skill was only skin-deep, how could he possibly withstand Kunlun Pai Zhang Men's strike?

He Taichong slightly leaned sideways. 'Slap!' his palm hit Zhang Wuji's face above his right eye so that his eye was immediately swollen. Zhang Wuji had realized early on that his skill was too far below of his opponent. Since he could not even return a single stance from the opponent, he might as well hang down his hands and stand still, no longer trying to resist. But He Taichong did not give up just because Zhang Wuji did not fight back, he still struck Zhang Wuji one palm after another. Only he did not use internal energy at all, otherwise, one palm strike would be enough to kill him. Still, each palm strike had made Zhang Wuji dizzy and his vision blurred; the pain was unbearable.

While He Taichong was hitting enthusiastically, Ban Shuxian, taking two disciples along, had arrived, she coldly standing on the side.

Seeing Zhang Wuji not fighting back, Ban Shuxian thought it was not interesting. "Try hitting that baby girl," she said.

He Taichong's body turned sideways and 'Slap!' he struck Yang Buhui's ear. Yang Buhui was hurt and crying loudly.

Zhang Wuji was angry, "It's alright for you to hit me, why must you bully a little girl?"

He Taichong ignored him, he stretched out his palm to strike Yang Buhui again. Zhang Wuji jumped forward to hit He Taichong's chest with his head.

Ban Shuxian sneered and said, "A little boy like that still knows passion and righteousness, unlike an old fickle who completely lacks any sense of love and justice."

Listening to his wife mocking him, He Taichong's face

reddened. He grabbed the back of Zhang Wuji's neck and threw him out. "Little bastard!" he roared, "Go see your father and mother!" He was using his full power, aiming Zhang Wuji's skull toward a large rock on the side of the mountain. Zhang Wuji was unable, he flew swiftly and in an instant he would hit the rock, his brain would burst open.

Suddenly a strong force came in from the side, pulling Zhang Wuji aside and stood him up on the ground. Zhang Wuji was shaken badly, he stood unsteadily and narrowed his swollen eyes to look to the side. He saw about five feet away stood a middle-aged scholar wearing white coarse cotton long robe.

Ban Shuxian and He Taichong looked at each other in astonishment; they did not hear this scholar coming, and did not see from where he came. Supposing he had already been hiding behind the rock, based on their capability, why did these husband and wife not know his presence? Just now He Taichong was using a considerable force in throwing Zhang Wuji toward the rock, the momentum was at least five, six hundred catties, yet the scholar neutralized it, and stood Zhang Wuji on the side, with only a roll of his sleeve. Clearly his martial art skills were amazingly high.

They noticed the scholar was around forty years of age, his appearance was elegant, only his eyebrows were slightly sagging. There were noticeable wrinkles on the corners of his mouth, as if he had grown old before his age due to suffering. He did not speak nor did he move, his expression was apathetic, as if his mind was on some distant place, thinking about some other matters.

He Taichong coughed once and asked, "Who are you, Sire? Why are you meddling willfully, interfering Kunlun Pai's business?"

The scholar indifferently said, "So you are Tie Qin Xiansheng [Mr. Iron Zither] and Mrs. He? I'm [orig. zaixia - the humble one] Yang Xiao."

"Ah!" as soon as the two words 'Yang Xiao' came out of his mouth, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and Zhang Wuji, three people, exclaimed together as if by prior agreement. The difference was: Zhang Wuji's exclamation was full of surprise and delight, while He Taichong, husband and wife, were shocked and angered.

'Shua, shua!' the two Kunlun Pai female disciples unsheathed their swords, reversed the sword hilts and gave the sword to their Shifu and Shimu [master and master wife]. He Taichong held the sword across to protect his abdomen, in the 'xue yong lan qiao' [snow covers the blue bridge] stance. Ban Shuxian held the sword with its tip slanting to the ground in the 'mu ye xiao xiao' [the rustling of trees and leaves] stance. These two stances were the most refined and mysterious within the Kunlun Pai sword techniques. The stances appeared light and casual, but behind each movement seven, eight swift and fierce follow-up movements were hidden.

The two people send their internal strength toward their right arms. With only a simple flick of their wrists, the swords in their hands would flash and they would be able to attack seven, eight vital points on their enemy's body. Facing a formidable enemy, the two of them were prepared to launch the skill they had learned for all their lives. However, Yang Xiao seemed oblivious to these people; he heard the delight in Zhang Wuji's voice and felt strange. He turned his glance toward Zhang Wuji, and saw his face was full of blood; his nose was swollen and his eyes blue from the beating he took from He Taichong earlier. He looked awful, but the happiness from the bottom of his heart overflowed to his unsightly face.

Zhang Wuji called out, "You, are you the Ming Cult's Left Emissary of Brightness, Yang Xiao Bobo [uncle, older than one's father]?"

Yang Xiao nodded, "How does a child like you know my name?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji pointed toward Yang Buhui and called out, "She is your daughter." Pulling Yang Buhui closer, he said, "Buhui Meimei, call him Papa, call him Papa! We finally found him!"

Yang Buhui looked at Yang Xiao with eyes opened wide. She was 90% unsure, but truth be told, she did not care whether he was her father or not. She only asked, "Where is Mama? Hasn't Mama flown down from the sky?"

Yang Xiao's heart was greatly shaken. He grabbed Zhang Wuji's shoulder and said, "Child, tell me clearly. She ... whose daughter is she? Who is her Mama?" His grab was too strong; Zhang Wuji's shoulder bone made a 'crack, crack' sound, the pain penetrated his heart.

Zhang Wuji was unwilling to show weakness and refused to cry of pain, but in the end an 'Ah!' cry still escaped from his mouth. "She is your daughter, her Mama was Emei Pai Heroine Ji Xiaofu," he said.

Yang Xiao's original complexion was pale, but this moment his face did not show any sign of pink at all. "She ... she has a daughter?" his voice was trembling, "She ... where is she?" Hastily he bent down to pick Yang Buhui up. After being struck twice by He Taichong, her cheeks were swollen big, but her features did remind him of Ji Xiaofu's beauty.

While Yang Xiao was about to inquire further, he suddenly

saw black silk thread hanging over her neck. He gently pulled the thread and saw at the end of the thread there was a piece of iron medallion. On the medallion there was a carving of blazing fire inlaid with gold. It was precisely the Ming Cult's 'tie yan ling' [iron flame symbol of authority] he gave Ji Xiaofu. His doubts were entirely gone. He embraced Yang Buhui tight and asked, "Where is your Mama? Where is your Mama?"

"Mama has flown to the sky," Yang Buhui replied, "I am looking for her. Did you see her?"

Yang Xiao realized she was too young to speak clearly, so he turned his questioning gaze toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Yang Bobo," he said, "Please don't be grieved. Ji Gugu [(paternal) aunt] was struck to death by her Shifu. At the point of death she ..."

"You're lying! You're lying!" Yang Xiao bawled. 'Crack!' Zhang Wuji's left arm was crushed by his grip. 'Thump! Thump!' Yang Xiao and Zhang Wuji fell down together. Yang Xiao's right hand was still holding his daughter tight.

He Taichong and Ban Shuxian looked at each other. They raised their swords; one was pointing to Yang Xiao's throat, the other to his forehead in between his eyebrows. Yang Xiao was the Ming Cult's expert fighter, his name was widely well-known. Ban Shuxian and He Taichong's master, Bai Luzi was killed by a Ming Cult person. Although the killer's name was unknown to them, most of Kunlun Pai people suspected it was Yang Xiao. As soon as Mr. and Mrs. He came across him by chance, they felt as if their hearts were soaked by a bucket of cold water as the hearts were beating faster. Who would have thought that Yang Xiao suddenly fainted? It truly was a heaven-sent opportunity, so they immediately take

control his vital points.

Ban Shuxian said, "Let's chop his arms first."

"Yes!" He Taichong replied.

At this time, Yang Xiao had not come around yet. Zhang Wuji's broken arm hurt like hell that his brow was wet with cold sweats, but his mind was still very clear. Realizing their critical situation, he stretched out his leg and lightly knocked the 'bai hui xue' [hundred-gathering acupoint] on top of Yang Xiao's head with his toes. 'Bai Hui' acupoint was connected directly to the brain; as soon as it was jolted, Yang Xiao regained his consciousness and opened his eyes at once. But he immediately felt the cold air of the sword pointing toward the center of his eyebrows, and saw a dark green shadow flash as another sword was hacking down on his left arm. It was too late for him to make any move, much less Ban Shuxian's sword was threatening his vital point; he simply could not move. Immediately he sent his internal energy to his left arm.

When He Taichong's sword cut his left arm, the blade suddenly slid to the side; the sword lost its power, as if it was cutting a slippery and resilient object. Yet the sleeve of Yang Xiao's white robe suddenly turned red. Obviously his arm was cut after all.

Right this moment, Yang Xiao's body suddenly stiffened and slipped more than a 'zhang' backward, just like if someone was tying a rope around his neck and pulling him with such an unbelievable speed. Ban Shuxian's sword was initially resting on his forehead. As Yang Xiao slipped backwards, the tip of the sword cut through from his forehead to his nose, mouth and chest, creating a long strip of bloody scar several 'fen' deep. [1 fen is approximately 1/3 of a centimeter or

about 1/8 of an inch].

It was a very risky move on Yang Xiao's part. Supposing Ban Shuxian's sword were half a 'cun' deeper [1 cun = 1 inch], Yang Xiao's chest and abdomen would be fatally cut. As he slipped away, immediately he stood stiffly up. These two movements were totally unpredictable. His knees were not bent, his waist did not buckle, he slipped out abruptly and stood up suddenly, as if his body was a mass of spring. The way his body stiffened strangely was no different from a living corpse.

As Yang Xiao stood up, his feet pushed down and 'Crack! Crack!' both swords of He Taichong and his wife were broken. Although his two kicks were sent out one after another, the speed was like lightning as if they were sent out at the same time. Based on He Taichong and Ban Shuxian's swordsmanship attainment, even if Yang Xiao martial art skill were stronger, he should not have been able to break the two people's swords just like that. Only his movements were so weird, plus he was seriously hurting when he suddenly escaped and launched a counterattack. He Taichong, husband and wife were so shocked that they pulled their sword a fraction of a second too late.

After breaking the swords, Yang Xiao kicked the two sword tips that they flew toward their two owners. He Taichong, husband and wife used their broken swords to block, but their palms were shaken and half of their bodies tingled. Although they managed to block the tips of the swords, the shock they experienced was not small. Hastily they retreated and jumped backward. One was standing on the northwest, the other on the southeast. Although they were holding half-broken swords in their hands, the 'Yang' sword pointed to the sky, the 'Yin' sword pointed to the earth. Two people with two swords combined and complemented each other. It was

precisely the Kunlun Pai's 'liang yi jian fa' [two appearances sword technique]. Although they were both scared, they still maintained a calm outward appearance, as steady and dignified as a mountain.

Kunlun Pai's 'liang yi jian fa' had enjoyed hundreds of years' reputation. It was one of world-famous sword techniques. He Taichong, husband and wife came from the same school, they had been practicing together since they both were very young, so their familiarity with this particular skill was matchless.

Yang Xiao had fought a number of great battles against the Kunlun Pai. He knew this sword technique was truly fierce. Although he was not afraid, he realized that he would not be able to defeat these two people in less than several hundred moves. This moment the only thing in his heart was Ji Xiaofu's death, how could he have any mood to fight? Let alone the cuts on his arm and face were not light, he would face an extreme danger if he let the wound bleed without an end. Thereupon he coldly said, "Kunlun Pai did not make any progress at all. I have to leave for the time being, but I will be back in the future to settle the score with worthy husband and wife."

His left hand was still holding Yang Buhui, his right hand reached out to pull Zhang Wuji. Without anybody saw him raise his foot or move his leg, he suddenly moved back more than a 'zhang'. With one turn of his body, he was already several 'zhang' away.

Mr. and Mrs. He looked at each other in astonishment; it was not easy for them to get rid of this big devil head, how could they dare to pursue?

Carrying two children along, in one breath Yang Xiao covered

a distance of several 'li' before he stopped suddenly. He asked Zhang Wuji, "What happened to Miss Ji Xiaofu?" He was running very fast, but was able to stop abruptly just like that, it was as if his body was nailed to the ground, he did not move even for half a 'fen'.

Zhang Wuji could not overcome the momentum, he was pulled forward and would have fallen if Yang Xiao did not pull him back. Hearing the question, he gasped for breath for a moment before answering, "Ji Gugu has died. Believe me or believe me not, it is entirely up to you. Why did you have to break my arm?"

A flash of regret appeared on Yang Xiao's face, but he kept asking, "She ... how did she die?" There was a hint of sobbing in his voice.

After drinking Ban Shuxian's poison, it had not been completely eradicated from his system although Zhang Wuji was able to vomit most of the poison and had also taken some anti-poison pills along the way. Presently he felt pain in his stomach again, so taking the golden-crowned blood snake, he let the snake bite his left hand index finger and suck the poison, while narrating in details how he came to know Ji Xiaofu, how he treated her injury, how he saw she was beaten to death by Miejue Shitai. By the time he finished his story, the golden-crowned blood snake had also finished sucking the poisonous blood from his body.

Yang Xiao asked him in detail what Ji Xiaofu had said at the point of her death. With tears streaming down his face he said. "That wicked nun Miejue was forcing her to harm me. If she agreed, not only she would render a great service to Emei Pai, she would also take over the Zhang Men position. Ay, Xiaofu, oh, Xiaofu, you would rather die than giving her your consent. Actually, you need only to pretend that you

agreed, then wouldn't we meet each other again? Then you would not have to lose your life under that wicked nun Mijue."

Zhang Wuji said, "Ji Gugu was a righteous person. She was not willing to scheme in secret and kill you surreptitiously but she was also unwilling to deceive her Shifu."

With a bitter laugh Yang Xiao said, "You knew Xiaofu well ... who would have guessed that her own Shifu could actually strike a vicious blow and took her life."

Zhang Wuji said, "I promised Ji Gugu that I will take Buhui Meimei to you ..."

Yang Xiao stiffened. "Buhui Meimei?" he asked. Turning his head, he asked Yang Buhui, "Child, my obedient treasure, what is your surname? And what is your given name?"

"My surname is Yang," Yang Buhui answered, "My name is Buhui [no regret]."

Yang Xiao looked up to the sky and let out a long whistle. His voice shook the forest in all directions that leaves were falling down like rain. When he finally stopped after a long time, he said, "You really are surnamed Yang. Buhui, Buhui. Good! Xiaofu, although I forced my desire on you, you had no regret."

Ji Xiaofu had told Zhang Wuji the sin and fate between the two people. This time he met Yang Xiao in person and found him to be handsome, natural and a bit unrestrained. Although he was somewhat older, he still could be considered as an elegant and graceful handsome man. Compared to his sixth uncle Yin Liting, who was still a bit childish, Zhang Wuji was afraid it would be easier for Yang

Xiao to make a woman fall upside down. Ji Xiaofu was disgraced by force, but in the end she fell in love with him; she must not be blamed. Although by this time Zhang Wuji was still too young to understand clearly, he had a vague thought about this kind of love-hate relationship.

The pain on Zhang Wuji's broken left arm was unbearable. Because for the time being he was not able to find herbal medicine to set broken bones and stop the pain, he had no alternative but to connect his broken bones first, then try to find some herbal medicine and apply it to his arm to reduce the swelling. He took two pieces of branch and used the tree bark to bind the branches onto his broken arm. Yang Xiao was amazed to see that young as he was, Zhang Wuji was able to mend the broken bones with only one hand with an absolute proficiency.

Finished binding his arm, Zhang Wuji said, "Yang Bobo, I have not failed Ji Gugu's trust. Buhui Meimei is safely in her Papa's hands. Let us part here."

Yang Xiao said, "From tens of thousands 'li' you have come to take my daughter to me. How can I not repay you? What is it that you want? All you need to do is open your mouth. In this world, the matters that are impossible for Yang Xiao achieve, the things that are unreachable to Yang Xiao, I am afraid are not too many."

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Yang Bobo, you look down on Ji Gugu too much. It was in vain that she died for you."

Yang Xiao's face was greatly changed. "What did you say?" he roared.

Zhang Wuji said, "It was because Ji Gugu did not look down on me that she entrusted her daughter to me to take to you. If I am doing this to seek reward, do you think I would be

worthy of her trust?" While in his heart he thought, "Along the way Buhui Meimei has encountered countless difficulties and I have had countless suffering for her. If I were greedy for benefit, unrighteous and unworthy disciple, how could you, father and daughter meet each other today?" It was just that he did not like to flaunt his own merit that he did not mention even a single word about the various hardships he endured along the way. As he finished speaking, he bowed with clasped hands and then turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Yang Xiao said, "You have done me a great kindness. Yang Xiao always repays gratitude and grudges. Come with me. Within a year I will pass on to you the world's rarest and fiercest martial art skills."

Zhang Wuji had seen it with his own eyes how he broke the swords of He Taichong, husband and wife; this kind of martial art skill was indeed rare to find its match in the Jianghu, so if he could learn only half a style from him, it would give him a tremendous advantage. However, he remembered Tai Shifu [grand master - referring to Zhang Sanfeng] repeatedly warned him not to associate himself with the Devil Cult people. Besides, even if Yang Xiao's martial art skills were higher, how could he surpass Tai Shifu? In addition to that, his own life would not be longer than half a year more; what would be the use even if he learned the unmatched martial art skill in the world? Thereupon he said, "Many thanks for Yang Bobo's offer, but 'wanbei' [younger generation - referring to self] is a Wudang disciple; I do not dare to learn other Sect's bright skill."

"Oh," Yang Xiao said, "Turns out you are Wudang Pai's disciple! In that case, Yin Liting ... Yin Liu Xia [sixth hero] ..."

Zhang Wuji said, "Yin Liu Xia is my Shishu [martial (younger) uncle]. Ever since my own father passed away, Yin Liushu's

treatment to me is no different than my own uncle. By accepting Ji Gugu's entrustment to take Buhui Meimei to Mount Kunlun, I cannot avoid ... cannot avoid feeling ashamed toward Yin Liushu."

As his gaze met with Zhang Wuji's, Yang Xiao felt ashamed. Waving his right hand, he said, "The Ol' Yang is deeply indebted to you. I am ashamed I cannot repay. Since that is the case, we will meet again someday." His shadow swayed, he was already several 'zhang' away.

Yang Buhui called out loudly, "Wuji Gege, Wuji Gege!" But Yang Xiao was unleashing his 'qing gong', in an instant he was very far, the 'Wuji Gege' cry gradually disappeared in the distant, until at last Yang Buhui's voice and her shadow vanished from his view.

End of Chapter 14.

*Note on the title:

A wolf had fallen into a hunter's trap. By chance, a village teacher passed by. The wolf asked the teacher to let him out. Out of compassion, the teacher took the wolf and put it into a sack to be brought home. Along the way, the wolf asked the teacher to let him out. Again, the teacher took him out of the sack and loosened the ropes. Then the wolf said, "I am starved, and I am going to eat you." The teacher said, "I saved you, and yet you are going to eat me? You are such an ungrateful creature." The wolf denied any wrong doing and thus they were engaged in a heated argument. It so happened that an old oak tree heard their arguments and agreed to be the judge. The tree said to the teacher, "You are such a weakling, how could you possibly help this fierce beast?" So the tree asked that the teacher and the wolf recreate what had happened. As soon as the wolf was inside the sack, the tree shouted, "Quickly tie the sack and kill the

wolf ...”

The story supposedly happened on Zhongshan, hence the term 'Zhongshan Wolf' is used to describe someone who repay kindness with evil.

Chapter 15 -Strange Scheme and Secret Intrigue Like in a Dream

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Thirty ferocious looking large dogs crouched on the ground. A young woman wearing genuine arctic fox fur coat was sitting on a chair. With a whip in her hand she barked her orders. A vicious dog leaped up suddenly and bit the throat of someone who was standing by the wall.

For tens of thousands 'li' Zhang Wuji had been travelling together with Yang Buhui, keeping each other company and relying on each other. Now that they suddenly parted, he felt sadness. However, thinking that at last he did not fail Ji Xiaofu by successfully delivering her daughter to Yang Xiao, he could not help feeling relieved and gratified. After standing still for half a day, he remembered that he might bump into He Taichong, Ban Shuxian, or other Kunlun Pai here, so he quickly walked down the valley.

After walking for more than ten days, his arm was gradually healing; however, wandering around Kunlun Mountains, he still could not find his way out of the mountain. One particular day, he walked for half a day and then stopped by a pile of rocks to take a rest. Suddenly from the northwesterly direction he heard sound of barking dogs. From the noise, he estimated there were about a dozen dogs or so. The sound of barking was getting closer, it seemed like the dogs were pursuing some wild animal. Amidst the barking dogs, there appeared a little monkey running for his life; there was a short arrow sticking out from the rear of the monkey's thigh. The monkey was still several 'zhang' away from Zhang Wuji when suddenly it fell tumbling down. Because of the arrow on its thigh it was unable to climb a tree. By this time its strength was gone that it could not even crawl back up.

Zhang Wuji came near the monkey and looked; the monkey looked back at him with fear, but its eyes also spoke to him, begging for pity. Zhang Wuji's heart was touched; he mused, "I am also running away from Kunlun Pai people, so we are in the same boat." Thereupon he gently lifted the monkey up and pulled the arrow out. Then he took some medicine from his pocket and applied it on the arrow wound.

Right this moment the barking of the dogs sounded very

near. Zhang Wuji quickly opened his robe and hid the monkey in his bosom. He heard loud and intense 'woof! woof! woof!' as a pack of about a dozen large hounds with sharp teeth surrounded him. The hounds smelled the monkey. They bare their fangs and brandish their claws threateningly, but did not dare to attack immediately.

Zhang Wuji was terrified to see these vicious dogs exposing their row after row of sharp white teeth. He knew that as soon as he let the monkey in his bosom out, the dogs would turn their attention to the monkey and would not give him any trouble. However, he had received instruction from his father since he was a child to take chivalry seriously; he did not want to fail even toward a wild animal. Immediately he leaped over the dogs and ran as fast as he could. The pack of dogs barked wildly and ran after him.

How could Zhang Wuji match the speed of the hounds? He only managed to run for about a dozen of 'zhang' when the pack of dogs overtook him. He felt a sudden pain on his leg as a vicious dog sank its teeth on him and would not let him go. Hastily he turned around and struck the dog's head with his palm. This palm strike carried his entire strength. The dog rolled down on the ground and then stopped moving altogether. The rest of the hounds attacked together. Zhang Wuji punched and kicked wildly with all his strength. However, his arm had not completely healed that he could not rotate his left hand; before long, a vicious dog bit his left hand and then the dogs pounced on him from all directions. His head, his face, his shoulders, practically his entire body was bitten by the dogs. While he was about to lose his consciousness out of shock and fear, he heard faint calls of a clear and tender voice of a woman. But the voice seemed to be very far away. His vision blackened and he passed out.

In his unconscious state, Zhang Wuji felt as if he was in the

middle of packs of jackals and wolves, tigers and leopards which were ready to devour him. He wanted to cry out for help, but no sound was coming out of his mouth. Suddenly he heard that someone was saying, "The critical situation has passed, perhaps he will live."

Zhang Wuji opened his eyes and saw a pale yellow light. He felt he was lying on a bed inside a small room, with a middle-aged man standing next to his bed.

"Da ... Dashu ... [big uncle, or more appropriately: honorable uncle] I ... how did I .." Zhang Wuji only managed to utter these words when he suddenly felt burning pains all over his body. Only then did he slowly remember that he was attacked and bitten by a pack of wild hounds.

"Xiaozi [boy, kid]," that man said, "Just consider yourself lucky you did not die. What is it? Are you hungry?"

"I ... where am I?" Zhang Wuji said. Because of severe pain all over his body, Zhang Wuji passed out again.

By the time he came around for the second time, the middle-aged man was no longer in the room. Zhang Wuji thought, "Definitely I won't live much longer, why do I have to experience this much torment?" Looking down his body, he saw his neck, his chest, arms and thighs were wrapped in cotton cloths, while a strong smell of medicine assailed his nostrils. Turned out someone was treating his wounds, but from the smell of the medicine, he knew the person applying the ointment had a rather shallow medical skill. He smelled almond, 'ma qian zi' [sorry, I don't know what it is], 'fang feng' [windproof], 'nan xing' [southern star], and various other herbs. These kind of herbs were effective to treat rabid dog bites, as it would draw out rabies pus from the wound; but the dogs biting him were not rabid at all, his wounds

were on his flesh and bones, without any poisoning. The medicine was not only ineffective, it would increase the pain.

Powerless to get up, he lay down until dawn. The middle-aged man came to check him up. Zhang Wuji said, "Dashu, thank you so much for saving me."

The man coldly said, "This is the 'Hong Mei Shan Zhuang' [Red Plum Villa]; it was our Miss who saved you. Are you hungry?" While saying that he went out and came back with a bowl of steaming hot porridge.

Zhang Wuji drank several mouthfuls, but his stomach was nauseous; his head was dizzy and he did not have the appetite to eat more.

He lay down for eight days before he was finally strong enough to get up. His legs felt weak without the least bit of strength. He knew it was because of excessive loss of blood, so it would take a while to recover.

The man came everyday to deliver his food and change his medication. Although his expression was rather bored, Zhang Wuji was still very appreciative toward him. Only, Zhang Wuji's mind was filled with unanswered questions, but he did not dare to ask too much because the man seemed uninterested to converse with him.

One day, the man returned with the same medication, 'fang feng', 'nan xing' and so on. Zhang Wuji could not help from saying, "Dashu, these medicines are not effective for my illness. Would you change it for me?"

The man turned to him with a condescending look. After staring at Zhang Wuji for half a day he said, "Laoye [old

master, grandmaster] personally wrote the prescription; how can he be wrong? You said the medicine is not effective, how could it revive you from the dead then? Really! Little kid is babbling nonsense. If our Laoye heard it, he might not be offended, but you really do not know good from bad." While saying that he spread the medicine on Zhang Wuji's wound. Zhang Wuji could only force a smile.

The man said, "I think your wound is so much better. Why don't you go see Laoye, Taitai [Madame], and Xiaojie [Miss] to kowtow and thank them for saving your life?"

"That is only appropriate," Zhang Wuji said, "Dashu, why don't you take me to see them?"

The man led Zhang Wuji out of the small room, walked through a long corridor, passed through two halls, and came to a warm chamber. It was the beginning of winter, but the Kunlun region had been very cold for quite some time. The room was as warm as the springtime. Zhang Wuji could not locate the furnace; he only saw the chamber was decorated extravagantly, with couches draped in brocade and soft pillows. In all his life Zhang Wuji had never seen such a splendid and cozy room as the one he was in. Looking at his own dirty clothes, he felt so out of place standing inside such a luxurious warm room; he could not help feeling ashamed at his own filth.

There was no one inside the warm room, but the man's expression was extremely respectful. Bowing, he said, "The boy who was bitten by the dog is well, he wants to kowtow to Laoye and Taitai to express his gratitude." After saying this, he stood silently with relaxed hands; he did not even dare to breathe loudly.

After what seemed like a long time, from behind the screen walked in a fifteen, sixteen year-old young woman. She cast

a sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Qiao Fu, what are you doing? Why did you bring him here? If the bugs and parasites from his body jump down, what are we going to do?"

"Yes, yes!" Qiao Fu replied.

Zhang Wuji had already been uncomfortable, this time his face blushed even redder. Other than the one on his back, he did not have any other change of clothes. Certainly his clothes were full with bedbugs and fleas by now. He thought that this Miss was not the least bit wrong.

He saw her face was oval like a goose egg, her black hair drooped over her shoulders. She was wearing some kind of fine silk or satin, which sparkled under the light. She wore a golden bracelet on her wrist. In short, he had never seen such a splendid and luxurious young lady. He mused, "When I was surrounded by the pack of dogs, I faintly heard a woman's voice shouting. That Qiao Fu Da Shu also said that it was his Miss who saved me. I ought to thank her." Thereupon he knelt down and kowtowed. "Thank you Miss for saving me," he said, "I will never dare to forget your kindness as long as I live."

The young girl was startled, and then she giggled. "Qiao Fu, Qiao Fu, what did you do? Did you fool this dumb kid?"

Qiao Fu laughed and said, "Xiao Feng Jiejie [older sister], this dumb kid kowtowed to you, you shouldn't accept it. The dumb kid has never seen beautiful face; he thought you are our Miss! But come to think about it, our home's maid is somewhat comparable to our honorable precious Miss [orig. 'qian jin' - thousand gold]."

Zhang Wuji was stunned, he stood up hastily. "It's bad!" he thought, "Turns out she is a maid, and I thought she was the

Miss.” His face turned red and white as he was extremely embarrassed.

Xiao Feng suppressed her laughter. She looked at Zhang Wuji to size him up. His face and upper body were still stained with blood; his wounds were still wrapped in cloth strips. Zhang Wuji was very self-conscious; he was aware of his filth and unsightly appearance, he wished the earth would open up and swallow him.

Xiao Feng lifted her sleeve to cover her nose while saying, “Laoye and Taitai are busy, you don’t need to kowtow. Let’s go to see Miss.” While saying that, she circled around Zhang Wuji at a distant and hurriedly led the way because she was afraid the bugs and fleas from Zhang Wuji’s body might jump onto hers.

Zhang Wuji followed behind Xiao Feng and Qiao Fu. Along the way he noticed the maids and servants were all wearing expensive looking clothes and jewelry. Of the chambers, halls and pavilions he passed there were not any that didn’t look exquisitely beautiful. Zhang Wuji spent the first ten years of his life on the Bing Huo Island [ice and fire]. For the next several years, he spent half his time on Mount Wudang, the other half in the Butterfly Valley. His food and drink and everyday life was very simple. He had never imagined that there were this kind of rich and luxury households in the world.

After walking for a while, they arrived outside a large pavilion. Zhang Wuji saw a sign above the door, which read 'ling ao ying' [spirit mastiff camp]. Xiao Feng walked into the pavilion. A moment later she came out and beckoned them to enter in. Qiao Fu then brought Zhang Wuji in.

As soon as he stepped in, Zhang Wuji was shocked, for he

saw more than thirty ferocious looking large dogs, arranged in three rows, crouching on the ground. A young woman wearing genuine arctic fox fur coat was sitting on a chair draped in tiger skin. There was a whip in her hand. She barked, "General Qian, throat!"

A vicious dog leaped up suddenly and bit the throat of someone who was standing by the wall. "Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji could not help but crying out as he saw this cruel scene. He saw the dog bit off a piece of flesh and then sat down and started to chew. When he calmed down, Zhang Wuji noticed that the person was actually a dummy made of leather. All its vital points were covered in chunks of meat.

The young woman barked again, "General Che Qi! Lower abdomen!" The second vicious dog leaped up and bit the dummy's lower abdomen.

To Zhang Wuji's surprise, these dogs were in training to follow orders to attack people. Their bites were highly accurate. To his shock, Zhang Wuji recognized these dogs as the pack of malicious hounds that wildly bit him at the mountain. Thinking back, he vaguely remembered that the shout which stopped the dogs was the voice of this young woman. At first he only knew that this Miss had saved his life, but now he realized that the many suffering he received was actually because of her. Anger arose to fill his chest; he thought, "That's it, that's it! She was in cahoots with the dogs. How can I deal with her? If I knew it earlier, I would rather die on that mountain than treating my injuries in her house." Ripping the bandages from his body, he threw strips of cloth to the ground then he turned around and walked away.

"Hey, hey!" Qiao Fu called out, "What are you doing? This is our Miss, why don't you kowtow to her?"

"Pei!" Zhang Wuji spat, "Thank her for what? The malicious dogs that injured me, don't they belong to her?"

The young woman turned her head. Seeing the extremely angry expression on Zhang Wuji's face, she showed a faint smile and beckoned him. "Xiao Xiongdi, come here," she called.

When Zhang Wuji saw her face, his heart suddenly went 'thump, thump, thump' continuously, because this young woman face was very captivating; it was so fair and smooth. In trying to fight his feelings, his ears were buzzing, his back turned cold and his limbs slightly trembled. He quickly hang his head low, he did not dare to look at her. His face, which was originally bloodless, suddenly turned deep red.

The young woman laughed. "Come here," she called again.

Zhang Wuji looked up. His eyes met her bright eyes which were like a vast expanse of water. His mind suddenly turned blurry; he slowly walked toward her against his own will.

"Xiao Xiongdi," the young woman said with a smile, "You are angry with me, aren't you?"

Zhang Wuji had suffered many pains under these dogs' teeth, how could he not be angry? But as he stood in front of her, he only felt that her breath smelled like orchid, her body emitted intermittent whiff of fragrance that he felt he was going to faint; how could he think about this word 'angry'? Shaking his head, he said, "I am not!"

The young woman said, "My surname is Zhu, given name Jiuzhen. How about you?"

"I am called Zhang Wuji," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Wuji, Wuji!" Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Hmm, it is a very elegant name. [Translator's note: Wuji means 'without a shame'] Xiao Xiongdi must have come from an aristocratic family. Mmm ... why don't you sit over there?" While saying that, she pointed to a low stool by her side.

Since the day he was born, Zhang Wuji had never seen such a beautiful woman that he was shaken to the core as if he was enchanted. If Zhu Jiuzhen told him to jump into a fiery pit, he would jump down without hesitation. Hearing her telling him to sit next to her, with unspeakable delight he immediately went and sat down reverently. It was beyond Xiao Feng and Qiao Fu's expectations to see their Miss showing favor toward this dirty and stinky kid.

Zhu Jiuzhen barked her order again, "General Zhe Chong! Chest!" One large dog leaped up to bite the dummy, but the meat on the chest of that dummy had been bitten by another dog; so that dog bit the meat on the side of the dummy's body and started to eat it.

Zhu Jiuzhen angrily said, "Greedy pig! You did not follow orders?" Raising the whip in her hand, 'Whack! Whack!' she lashed it twice.

The whip was full of thorns, as it lashed down, two long strips of bloodstains appeared on the back of the dog. But the dog was still unwilling to put the meat down, it growled menacingly instead.

"You are not following orders?" Zhu Jiuzhen barked. The whip lashed again, striking the dog so that it rolled around wildly with blood dripping from all around its body. Her whip technique was swift and ingenious, no matter where the dog

run, it could not escape from the whip. At last the dog spat out the meat and then kneeled on the ground, motionless, whining in low voice. Yet Zhu Jiuzhen did not stop lashing her whip until it was dying to its last breath, and then she said, "Qiao Fu, put medicine on it."

"Yes, Miss!" Qiao Fu replied, and took the wounded dog out of the hall and handed it over to the servant in charge of the dogs.

The rest of the dogs were all frightened to see this scene; no one dared to move. Zhu Jiuzhen sat back on her chair and barked her orders again, "General Ping Kou! Left leg! General Wei Yuan! Right arm! General Zheng Dong! Eye!" One by one the vicious dogs leaped bit according to the order, no one missed the target.

To Zhang Wuji's amazement, she had given these dozens of ferocious dogs names as generals, while she directed them all with ease and competence just like a marshall. Zhu Jiuzhen turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and said with a smile, "Did you see these animals? If I do not firmly beat them with the whip, how can they be obedient to me?"

Although this pack of dogs had inflicted enormous pain on him, seeing the dog was beaten to miserable condition, Zhang Wuji could not restrain from feeling sorrowful.

Seeing he did not respond, Zhu Jiuzhen laughed and said, "You said you are not mad at me, but you don't say something? How did you come to the western region? Where are your father and mother?"

Zhang Wuji thought that with his current miserable condition, if he mentioned the name of Tai Shifu and his parents' names, he would only bring disgrace to them;

thereupon he said, "My parents are dead. It was hard for me to survive in the Central Plains, so I wandered everywhere and ended up in here."

"I shot that monkey," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Who told you to hide it in your bosom? You were so hungry that you wanted to eat monkey's meat, weren't you? You had not thought that you might be ripped to death by my dogs."

Zhang Wuji blushed; he repeatedly shook his head and said, "I was not thinking of eating the monkey."

With a captivating smile Zhu Jiuzhen said, "In front of me, you'd better not deny it." Suddenly she remembered something and asked, "What kind of martial art did you train? My General Zuo's skull shattered and it died. Your palm power is truly not bad."

Hearing that he had killed one of her pet dogs, Zhang Wuji apologetically said, "I was in panic and hit with all I had. When I was little, I learned two, three years of random punching and kicking with my father, it was not any martial art at all."

Zhu Jiuzhen nodded, then turned to Xiao Feng and said, "Take him to bath and give him some presentable clothes."

Xiao Feng pursed her lips, laughed and said, "Yes!" and took Zhang Wuji out.

Zhang Wuji was reluctant to part from Zhu Jiuzhen; as he reached the door, he could not help but turn his head to look at her one more time. Who would have thought that Zhu Jiuzhen was also looking at him? As he looked at her bright and beautiful eyes, she flashed him a sweet and captivating smile. Zhang Wuji blushed until he felt his entire body, from

the root of his hair to the end of his toes, turned red; as if his soul had just left him. He did not pay attention to the threshold, and thus he tripped and fell flat on his face, right on top of dog dung. His entire body was still covered with wounds; this fall had made him sore all over, but he did not dare to groan, he busily propped himself up and crawled away.

Xiao Feng giggled and said, "To see our Miss, everybody would be infatuated and head over heels in love with her. But you are still this young, you are also falling for her?" Zhang Wuji was really embarrassed, he rushed ahead of her.

After walking for a while, Xiao Feng laughed and said, "Are you going to take a bath and change your clothes in Taitai's room?"

Zhang Wuji halted his steps at once and looked up; he saw above the door ahead of them hung an embroidered golden banner. He had never been to this place before. It was then that he realized that in his confusion he had taken the wrong turn. That maid Xiao Feng was so sly that although she knew, she did not say anything, but waited until he went straight to the family room before opening up her mouth to mock him.

Zhang Wuji hang his reddened face down without saying anything. Xiao Feng said, "You call me 'Xiao Feng Jiejie' and earnestly ask me, then I'll take you out."

Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Feng Jiejie ..."

With her right hand index finger pointing to her own cheek Xiao Feng said with straight face, "Hmm, what do you want from me?"

"I am asking you to take me out," Zhang Wuji said.

"That's better," Xiao Feng laughed.

Taking him back to the small room, Xiao Feng said to Qiao Fu, "Miss said for him to take a bath and change his clothes with a clean one."

"Yes, yes!" Qiao Fu replied. He was full of respect. Apparently, although Xiao Feng was also but a servant, compared to the other servants and maids her position was somewhat higher. Five, six male servants immediately stepped in, calling her 'Xiao Feng Jiejie this' and 'Xiao Feng Jiejie that', flattering her to no end. Xiao Feng actually looked cold and indifferent. Suddenly she came to Zhang Wuji and bowed to him.

Zhang Wuji was flabbergasted. "You ... why?" he stammered.

Xiao Feng laughed and said, "Just now you kowtowed to me, right now I am returning the respect to you." Finished speaking, she disappeared into the inner chamber in a flash.

Qiao Fu told everybody else how Zhang Wuji thought Xiao Feng was their Miss, how he kowtowed to her, adding some spices to his story, describing Zhang Wuji's appearance as more ridiculous than it actually was so the hall was full with the crowd of servants' howl of laughter. Zhang Wuji entered the room with his head hung low, but he was not angry. His heart was filled with the memory of the Miss' laughter and anger, and each word she uttered.

After he took a bath, he saw Qiao Fu return with a set of dark green clothing, which he recognized as the servants' attire. Zhang Wuji was angry in his heart, "I am not your family's servant," he mused, "How do you expect me to wear this

kind of clothes?" He was about to wear his own worn out clothes when suddenly he noticed it was full of holes, exposing his skin and flesh. "If Miss wants to see me again and sees that I am still wearing this kind of dirty and worn out clothing, she will be unhappy," he thought, "Actually, what wrong with me being her servant and doing errands for her?" With this thought, he calmed down and changed into the servant clothes.

Contrary to his expectation, not only the Miss did not call him that day, for the next a dozen of days later, he did not even see Xiao Feng, let alone the Miss. Zhang Wuji often daydreamed with blank expression on his face, thinking the Miss' voice, her laugh and her face. He even felt that her appearance when she fiercely whipping the dogs was kind of flirtatious and lovely. He was thinking of going to the rear courtyard on his own. He would be satisfied just by looking at her from a distant, or hearing her voice when she was talking to someone else. But Qiao Fu had repeatedly warned him that if it was not their master who summoned them, they were not supposed to enter the gate. Otherwise, the vicious dogs would devour them. Remembering the ferociousness of the dogs, although he longed to see her, in the end he decided it was probably not a good idea to go to the rear courtyard.

More than a month had passed. Zhang Wuji's broken arm was healed as good as new. The wounds of the dogs' bite had also been healed, only there were some permanent teeth mark scars on his arms and legs. However, instead of feeling upset, a feeling of sweetness crept into his heart each time he remembered that these scars were from the Miss' pet dogs.

These days, the cold poison in his body still flared up once every few days. Each time it flared up, it was worse than the

last. One day the poison attacked him again. He lay down on the bed with the cotton quilt wrapped tightly around his body, while he was shivering badly. Qiao Fu came into the room. He was accustomed to see Zhang Wuji under the cold attack and did not think of anything unusual.

“Get plenty of rest,” he said, “Drink lots of hot preserved meat porridge! This is the new clothes Taitai [Madame] give to you for the New Year.” While saying that, he put a bundle on the table.

Zhang Wuji endured the poison attack all through the night before the cold gradually subsided. He got up and opened the bundle only to see a set of leather clothes. The lining was of snow-white sheepskin. He was delighted. The style of the leather clothes was still of the servant attire, apparently the Zhu family had regarded him as their servant.

Zhang Wuji had always had a warm nature and seldom lost his temper; he did not consider the clothes as an insult. He only thought, “It’s hard to imagine I have been here for more than a month. Very soon it will be the New Year. Mr. Hu said I would not live for more than a year. This New Year will be my last. I will be gone before the next New Year.”

As the year came to a close and the New Year’s Day approached, the bustling of activities in the rich family doubled. The servants were very busy painting the walls and the doors, and slaughtering pigs and sheep; all were in high spirits. Zhang Wuji helped Qiao Fu do some errands. He was hoping the New Year’s Day would arrive soon, thinking that when he kowtowed to wish Laoye, Taitai and Miss a happy new year, he would see Miss again. After seeing her one more time, he would quietly go away and die in some remote mountain area, so that he would not be an unnecessary burden for Qiao Fu and the other servants.

Amidst the noise of the firecrackers, the New Year's Day arrived. Zhang Wuji followed Qiao Fu toward the main hall to greet their masters for the New Year. He saw a pair of elegant and beautiful middle-aged man and woman sitting in the hall, while around seventy, eighty maids and servants kneeled down on the floor.

With a happy laugh the man and the woman said, "Everybody has worked hard!" While on the side, two housekeepers distributed money. Zhang Wuji also received two 'liang' [tael] of silver. He did not see the Miss and was very disappointed. Holding the money with a blank expression on his face, he suddenly heard a charming and flirtatious voice from the outside, "Biaoge [older male cousin], you come here early this year." It was precisely Zhu Jiuzhen's voice.

A male voice laughed and said, "Would I dare to come late to greet Jiujiu and Jiumu [maternal uncle and aunt, respectively] a happy new year?"

Zhang Wuji's face turned hot; he felt as if his heart was about to jump out of his chest, his palms were wet with perspiration. After hoping for two whole months this was the first time he heard Zhu Jiuzhen's voice again; how would he stop his soul from being shaken?

He heard another female voice saying, "Shige [older martial brother] rushed here early, I wonder if he wants to pay a New Year visit to our Elders, or if he wants to a New Year visit to Biaomei [younger female cousin]?"

Amidst the voices, three people stepped into the hall. The crowd of servants stepped aside one after another. Zhang Wuji absentmindedly stood motionless. It was not until Qiao Fu forcefully pulled him aside that he finally moved out of

the way.

Among the three people walked in, one was a young man. Zhu Jiuzhen walked on his left. She was wearing a scarlet sable coat, accentuating her tender and beautiful face, difficult to be described, difficult to be painted. On the other side of the young man was another young woman. Ever since Zhu Jiuzhen entered the hall, Zhang Wuji's eyes had never left her; he did not even care whether the young man and the other young woman were smart or were ugly, or whether they were wearing red or green. The two people kowtowed toward the masters, husband and wife. The hosts and the guests exchanged some words, but Zhang Wuji was oblivious to it all; he heard it but did not understand. In his eyes there was only Zhu Jiuzhen one person.

Actually Zhang Wuji was still too young, about male-female relationship, he only 'knew one but understand a half'. However, just like everybody else, it was the first time his lust was awakened by a young and good-looking woman that he was infatuated and head over heels like a fool; so it was hardly Zhang Wuji's natural disposition at all. Furthermore Zhu Jiuzhen was indeed dazzlingly beautiful, and he met her while he was in distress and she saved him; his admiration was hard to control. He only felt that as long as he could look at her once and hear her voice, then he would have an inexhaustible joy.

The masters, husband and wife, talked with three young people for a while. "Pa, Ma," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "I am going out to play with Biaoge and Qing Mei [younger sister Qing]!" Her voice carried a thirty-percent little spoiled girl's tone. The masters smiled and nodded.

Mrs. Zhu said with a laugh, "Take good care of Wu Jia Meizi [little sister of the Wu family], you, three teenagers, must

not quarrel among yourselves in this New Year's Day."

Zhu Jiuzhen laughed. "Ma," she said, "Why don't you tell Biaoge not to bully me?"

The three young people were talking and walking toward the rear courtyard. Without realizing it, Zhang Wuji followed from a distance. That day the servants had the freedom to do whatever they liked; some went out to play, some went out to gamble. By this time Zhang Wuji had seen clearly that the young man was quite handsome, his body was as beautiful as jade. Even in a cold day like this, he was only wearing thin yellow satin clothes; obviously his internal energy was not weak.

The other girl was wearing a black sable coat. Her figure was slender and graceful, her words and actions were refined. Speaking of grace and beauty, she was comparable to Zhu Jiuzhen, but in Zhang Wuji's eyes, she was nothing compared to the Miss he venerated as a goddess. All three of them were about seventeen, eighteen years of age.

The three of them were walking and talking and laughing toward the rear courtyard. "Zhen Jie [older sister Zhen]," the other girl said, "Have you trained your Yi Yang Zhi [solitary yang finger] skill to the second level? Would you demonstrate it to broaden Meizi's [younger sister] horizon?"

"Aiyo!" Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You don't want me to look good, do you? Even if I trained for ten more years, I would never surpass one stroke of your Wu family's 'lan hua xue shou' [orchid acupoint brushing technique]."

The young man said with a laugh, "The two of you need not to be modest. The great name of 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu' [Two Beauties of the Snowy Range] possesses an impressive

power and prestige.”

Zhu Jiuzhen said, “Being alone in my home, I blindly think through this, how can I surpass your rapid advancement, Shi Xiong Mei [martial (older) brother and (younger) sister], who can consult and discuss between the two of you? Today you came to see the stance, tomorrow you compare notes, doesn’t that mean ‘a thousand ‘li’ in one day’?”

The other girl could hear the vinegar [meaning ‘jealousy’] in her voice; she simply pursed her lips without saying anything, but in doing so, she tacitly agreed with what she was saying.

The young man was afraid Zhu Jiuzhen would get angry for real. “That’s not necessarily true,” he quickly said, “You have two Shifus, with Jiufu and Jiumu both teaching you, won’t you be stronger than we are?”

Zhu Jiuzhen angrily said, “What do you mean by ‘we’? Humph, of course you love your Shimei more than your Biaomei. Whenever I am playing with Qing Mei, you are always in her side.” While saying that, she turned her head away, no longer paid any attention to him.

Accompanied by a smile, the young man said, “I love my Biaomei, I also love my Shimei. My palm is part of my body, as much as the back of my hand, there is no difference between one and another. Biaomei, why don’t you take me to see those guard generals of yours? Certainly you have trained those generals to be fiercer and fiercer.”

“Alright!” Zhu Jiuzhen started to feel happy; she led them toward the Ling Ao Ying.

Zhang Wuji was following them from afar; he saw them

talking and laughing, but he did not hear a word they were saying. Presently he also followed them into the dogs' courtyard.

Turned out Zhu Jiuzhen was a descendant of Zhu Zhiliu. The girl surnamed Wu was Wu Qingying, she was Wu Santong's descendant from Wu Xiuwen's line. Wu Santong and Zhu Zhiliu were disciples of Yideng Dashi [Reverend 'One Lamp'], so their martial art skills came from the same source. But after more than a hundred years, each of the family developed their own variations. The two brothers Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen were under the tutelage of Da Xia [great hero] Guo Jing. Although they also learned the Yi Yang Zhi, their martial art style was closer to the 'hard' and 'fierce' way of Jiu Zhi Shen Gai [Nine-finger Divine Beggar] Hong Qigong.

The young man, Wei Bi, was Zhu Jiuzhen's [maternal] cousin. Not only he was handsome, his temperament was also gentle and easygoing, and thus both Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying's hearts were captivated and both secretly fell in love with him. The two girls, Zhu and Wu, were approximately of the same age, they were both beautiful and glamorous. Just like the spring orchid and the autumn chrysanthemum, each had her own strength; the martial art skills they inherited from their respective families were also comparable.

About two, three years ago, the Wulin community around the Kunlun region gave them the title 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu'. Ever since then, these two women had been competing against each other in secret. This situation had put Wei Bi on the hot seat; it was as if he had to choose between the bear paw and the fish, a very difficult choice indeed. Consequently, each time the three of them were together, although outwardly they were polite, the two girls

were actually fighting a battle of words, nobody was willing to yield to the other. Only Wu Qingying was more introvert and was not quite outspoken. Besides, Wei Bi and she were of the same school, everyday, day and night, they saw each other a lot; therefore, she had a distinct advantage over Zhu Jiuzhen.

Zhu Jiuzhen ordered the servant in charge of the vicious dogs to release them out. The dogs followed orders to the letter, not one missed its intended target. Wei Bi did not stop voicing his compliments. Zhu Jiuzhen was very proud of herself.

Wu Qingying pursed her lips and laughed. "Shige," she said, "I wonder which one will you be in the future, 'Guan Jun' [lit. head of the army, champion], or 'Piao Qi' [lit. rider of the white horse]?"

Wei Bi was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

Wu Qingying said, "You are so obedient toward Zhen Jie [older sister Zhen], won't she bestow to you the title of 'General Guan Jun' or 'General Piao Qi'? Only, you must be very careful toward her whip."

Wei Bi blushed deep red; there was a slight sign of anger in between of his eyebrows. "Pei!" he spat, "Rubbish! Are you cursing me as a dog?"

Wu Qingying smiled and said, "The 'generals' are always by a beautiful woman's side, shaking their tails and begging for affection. They have a very amusing life. What's not to like?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was angry. "If he were a dog," she said, "What does that make his Shimei?"

Listening to this, Zhang Wuji could not stop laughing, 'Ha!' escaped from his mouth. He realized immediately of his rudeness, so he covered up his mouth quickly.

Wu Qingying felt anger was boiling inside her stomach, but she knew it was inappropriate to explode in front of Zhu Jiuzhen, so she stood up and said, "Zhen Jie, your mansion's servants are truly well-mannered. We are chatting here and this servile kid unexpectedly eavesdropping on the side, and still dares to laugh once or twice. Shige, I am going home first."

Zhu Jiuzhen suddenly remembered that Zhang Wuji was able to strike dead her 'General Zuo' with his palm; his strength was actually not small. She laughed and said, "Qing Mei, you do not need to be angry, and do not underestimate this little servant either. Although your Wu family's martial art is strong, if you are able to flatten this servile kid within three moves, I will truly submit to you."

"Humph," Wu Qingying said, "Does this kind of kid deserve me put forth my own hand to deal with? Zhen Jie, you belittle me too much."

Zhang Wuji was not able to stop from shouting, "Miss Wu, I also have a father and a mother; am I not a human? What do you think you are? Bodhisattva? A princess?"

Wu Qingying did not even look at him. "Shige," she turned toward Wei Bi, "You let me receive the insult this little servant hurled at me without helping me?"

Seeing her loveable and hurt expression, Wei Bi's heart had melted early on. Although he was impartial toward the 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu', he knew perfectly well that his Shifu's martial art skill was incomprehensively deep. The skill he

would expect to learn from him would be at most ten or twenty percent. If he wanted to master the peerless skill, there was no other way but to win his Shimei's favor. Thereupon he said to Zhu Jiuzhen, "Biaomei, this little servant's martial art skill is not bad, is it? Would you let me test him?"

Zhu Jiuzhen understood he was trying to help his martial sister, but she had another thought, "I don't know the origin of this servant kid surnamed Zhang. Perhaps it is not such a bad idea to let Biaoge compel him to reveal his foundation." Thereupon she said, "Alright. Let him receive instruction from the Wu family unique skill. Nothing could be better than that. This man, even I do not know which school's disciple he is."

Wei Be was surprised. "This servant kid's martial art skill did not come from your family?" he asked.

Toward Zhang Wuji Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Why don't you tell Shaoye [young master] who your Shifu is, and which school he belongs to?"

"You despise me too much," Zhang Wuji thought, "How can I mention my parents' schools, and thus dishonor Taishifu and my departed parents? Besides, I have never seriously practiced Wudang Pai's martial art." Thereupon he said, "My parents passed away when I was a child, I wandered the Jianghu in destitute. I do not know any martial art, I only received a little bit of instructions from my father when I was little."

"What was your father's name? Which school did he belong to?" Zhu Jiuzhen asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "I can't tell you," he said.

Wei Bi laughed. "With the three of us looking, can't we find it out ourselves?" he said. Slowly he walked to the center of the courtyard. "Kid," he said with a laugh, "Why don't you try taking three stances of mine?" While saying that, he turned toward Wu Qingying and gave her a wink. His meaning was clear, "Shimei, no need to get angry. I am going to beat this kid really bad to vent your anger."

For someone in love, each word and each action, a frown or a smile of the beloved's would not escape attention. Zhu Jiuzhen was no different. She understood clearly the meaning of Wei Bi's wink. Seeing Zhang Wuji was unwilling to concede, she beckoned to him, calling him to come over and then in a low voice whispered in his ear, "My Biao's martial art skill is very strong. You don't need to defeat him. As long as you can resist his three stances, you are giving me a lot of face." Finished speaking, she patted his shoulder to show her encouragement.

Zhang Wuji knew he was not Wei Bi's match. If he conceded, he would unavoidably invite trouble and humiliation on himself, and brought nothing more than delight in these people's hearts. But standing in front of Zhu Jiuzhen, his mind was chaotic. Hearing her soft voice and gentle words urging him, and smelling her perfume, how could he think clearly? His only thought was, "Miss orders me to fight. Even for a more difficult and dangerous task, I would risk my life to do it; what's the harm in receiving a few punches and kicks?" He absentmindedly walked toward Wei Bi and stood in front of him with a blank expression.

Wei Bi said with a laugh, "Kid, take this!" 'Slap! Slap!' he struck Zhang Wuji twice on his face.

These two slaps came so fast that when Zhang Wuji was

about to lift his hand to block, his face had already struck. His cheeks swelled with red palm marks on them.

Wei Bi knew Zhang Wuji did not receive any martial art instructions from the Zhu family, so he knew he had nothing to fear in term of causing Zhu Jiuzhen, as well as his uncle and aunt lose face. His strikes were without any reservation, only he did not use any internal energy; otherwise, Zhang Wuji's teeth would have fallen and his cheekbones broken, he would have fainted.

"Wuji, fight!" Zhu Jiuzhen called out.

As soon as he heard his Miss call, Zhang Wuji's spirit was aroused. With a grunt he punched straight forward. Wei Bi evaded sideways and praised him. "Good kid, you know what you are doing!" he said. Moving sideways, he jumped toward Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji hastily turned around, but like a lightning Wei Bi's hand reached out and grabbed his collar. Lifting his arm high, he laughed and said, "Go eat the dog's dung!" and threw Zhang Wuji hard to the ground.

Zhang Wuji learned martial arts from Xie Xun for several years, but first, he was still too young; second, Xie Xun only told him to memorize the theory and the stances, without giving him any real combat experience. Meeting a disciple from a prestigious family like Wei Bi, his hands and feet were bound and he was unable to launch any stance. As he was being thrown, he wanted to stretch out his hand to break the fall, but it was too late. 'Bang!' his forehead and nose heavily hit the ground and blood spread all over his face.

Wu Qingying clapped and cheered. Giggling sweetly she said, "Zhen Jie, is our Wu family martial art good enough for you?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was ashamed and angered at the same time. If she said the Wu family martial art was not good, she would unavoidably offend Wei Bi; but if she said it was good, she was unbearably angry toward Wu Qingying and did not give her any satisfaction. Without any better option, her face turned cold and she did not say anything.

Zhang Wuji crawled up and looked gingerly at Zhu Jiuzhen. Seeing her knitted eyebrows, he said in his heart, "Even if I have to die, I must not make Miss lose her face."

Wei Bei laughed and said, "This kid does not even know three-legged cat martial art, why do we have to talk about his school or sect?"

Zhang Wuji suddenly lunged forward, his leg flew toward Wei Bi's lower abdomen. "Aiyo!" Wei Bi called out with laughter. By moving slightly backward, he evaded this kick, right after, his left hand reached out and grabbed Zhang Wuji's right foot, which was still in the air, and flung it sideways. He was only using 30% of his power, but Zhang Wuji flew toward the wall like an arrow leaving its bow. In desperation Zhang Wuji kicked the ground to make his back face the wall. Although his skull escaped the disaster of shattering down, his back hurt so much that he felt as if all the bones in his body had been broken. He slid down along the wall and sat on the ground like a pile of mud; unable to crawl back up.

Although he was in severe pain, he was still concerned over Zhu Jiuzhen losing face; while he was still in dazed, he heard that she was saying, "This servant kid is totally useless. Let us go to the garden to play!" Obviously she was very angry.

Without knowing where the strength came from, Zhang Wuji

turned around, propping himself on the ground and pounced with a palm strike toward Wei Bi.

Wei Bi laughed aloud and stretched out his palm backward to block. 'Slap!' to his surprise, his body swayed, forcing him to take a step back. Turned out Zhang Wuji was using the 'Qi Xing Shou' [seven-star (or Big Dipper constellation) hand] from the 'Wudang Chang Quan' [Wudang Long Fist], which his father, Zhang Cuishan taught him during the voyage on the raft. Wudang Long Fist was Wudang's special skill. Although the fist was not strong, it carried a subtle variation. Wudang's martial art had always departed from the mainstream martial art study, the emphasis was to use softness to subdue hardness, using the weak to defeat the strong, injuring the enemy without using one's own strength; rather, it incited the enemy's strength toward himself. If the enemy was using a catty of force, then the reacting force was also one catty; if the enemy was using a hundred catties, then a hundred catties would return to him. It was like punching the wall. The heavier one punched, the heavier the reaction force he had to suffer.

In the past, when Jue Yuan Dashi [Reverend Jue Yuan] recited the 'Nine Yang Manual', he said, 'use one's own strength, strike only after the enemy has struck'. Later on, Zhang Sanfeng used this principle to govern the Wudang fist technique. If it was Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou or the other Wudang experts, they might add their own strength above the enemy's. Zhang Wuji's mastery of this skill was only superficial, yet in this punch he was unconsciously successful in inciting the opponent's force.

Wei Bi felt his hand was sore and numb, the 'chi' and blood in the pit of this stomach were shaken. Immediately he leaned sideways and sent out a fist toward Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji swept his palm backward to parry using

the stance 'yi tiao bian' ['the whip']. Seeing his marvelous palm technique, Wei Bi hurriedly evaded backwards, but his shoulder was still brushed by Zhang Wuji's three fingers. Although he was not hurt, Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying had naturally seen that he had lost this move.

Wei Bi was in the presence of his sweetheart, how could he concede? At first, when he was face to face with Zhang Wuji, seeing the opponent was a young boy, he looked at him condescendingly. He had no doubt that he would win martial-art-wise, but he wanted to toy with Zhang Wuji to win Wu Qingying's favor; and thus his fists and kicks only carried about 20, 30% of his strength. This time, as he suffered defeat twice in a row, he shouted, "Little demon, are you not afraid of death?" With a loud grunt his fist went straight to Zhang Wuji's chest.

His fist, which contained three layers of force, was from the 'Chang Jiang San Die Lang' [Yangtze River's three layers of waves]. If the opponent used all his strength to block the first layer of force, he would not anticipate the second layer of force would follow closely, followed by the violent third layer of force immediately surging up. Unless the opponent was a martial art master, he would certainly meet death or at least seriously wounded.

Seeing the severity of the opponent's move, Zhang Wuji was scared. Without enough time to think, he remembered that his father on the wooden raft in the middle of the ocean taught him a technique where both arms circled back and break the opponent's hand, called the 'jing lan' [cross-fence (like the symbol '#')]. This stance was very broad and deep; how could Zhang Wuji comprehend its essence? It was just that he was in such a desperate situation that he had used it without thinking.

Wei Bi was sending out his right hand punch straight toward Zhang Wuji's right arm. He felt as if the first layer of force of his own fist was entering the vast ocean, it vanished without a trace. While he was startled, 'crack!' the second layer of force bounced back and the bone of his right arm was jolted and it broke. Lucky for him he had not launched the third layer of force, otherwise, because Zhang Wuji did not understand the wondrous use of this 'jing lan' stance, both of them would suffer serious injury under this third layer of force.

Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying both cried out in alarm and rushed toward Wei Bi to look at his injury. "Not a problem," Wei Bi smiled bitterly, "I was just being careless."

Seeing the love of their lives was wounded, as if by prior agreement Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying both sent out their palms toward Zhang Wuji. As he succeeded in breaking Wei Bi's arm, Zhang Wuji was also being hit so he was almost thrown backward. Zhu and Wu, two girls' palms had arrived while his feet were still staggering. In his daze, Zhang Wuji failed to evade. One palm hit his chest, the other hit his shoulder. He instantly threw up a mouthful of blood. Yet in his heart his resentment was greater than his bodily pain; he thought, "I fought with all my might for you so that you won't lose face, but after I actually won you hit me!"

"Stop!" Wei Bi called out. Zhu and Wu, two girls halted their hands following his order. They saw him raise his left palm with an ashen face, and he struck Zhang Wuji again. Zhang Wuji hastily leaped sideways to evade.

"Biaoge!" Zhu Jiushen called out, "You are injured. Why should you lower yourself to the same level as this little servant? I was wrong. I should not have asked you to fight with him."

Based on her usually arrogant temperament, she would never ever bow her head to admit her own mistake to anybody. It was just that she saw her lover's arm was broken that she was frightened and felt sorry for him and thus she was willing to humble herself. Who would have thought that when Wei Bi heard her, he was even more enraged?

"Biaomei," he said with a cold laugh, "Your little servant's skill is superior, where were you wrong? It's just that I am not convinced yet." As he said that, he pushed Zhu Jiuzhen aside with his left arm, and then raised his fist to strike Zhang Wuji again.

Zhang Wuji was about to step backward to evade when Wu Qingying pushed his back gently with her palms, so that he could not step back. Wei Bi's fist hit Zhang Wuji squarely on the bridge of his nose and immediately blood started to flow down from his nose.

Wu Qingying was far more shrewd compared to Zhu Jiuzhen; she helped her martial brother in secret, without showing any sign, so that he did not lose face and felt appreciative towards her.

Zhu Jiuzhen saw it and thought, "You can help your Shige, do you think I cannot help my Biaoge?" Thereupon she also put forth her hand to attack Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was far inferior to Wei Bi to begin with; now that Zhu and Wu, two girls, one was helping him in the open, the other was helping him surreptitiously, in a short moment Zhang Wuji had to suffer the three people's punches and kicks. In just seven, eight moves, he had vomited several mouthfuls of blood.

With the heart full of resentment, Zhang Wuji disregarded his own life and launched the 32 stances Wudang Long Fist one after another. Although his mastery was insufficient and each fist and each kick lacked power, the Wudang Long Fist was his family's special skill, so that after the time needed to drink a cup of tea later, he was still standing and not falling down.

Zhu Jiuzhen roared, "Where did this stinky kid come from? He dares to come to the Zhu and Wu manors with such unruly manners; he is truly impatient to give his life away."

Wei Bi raised up his left palm and hacked down in full force toward Zhang Wuji's left shoulder so that Zhang Wuji's body was pushed forward toward Wei Bi's other palm. Wei Bi's broken arm was getting more and more painful, so he was unwilling to prolong his fight with this lowly servant. His palm carried 100% of his strength. Zhang Wuji, unable to stop himself from fumbling forward, felt a strong gust of wind on his face and realized he was helpless to block, but he still tried to lift both arms to parry.

"Stop!" suddenly they all heard an imposing voice shout. A blue shadow flashed by, somebody flew from the side and fended off Wei Bi's palm. His movement seemed light, but surprisingly Wei Bi was unable to hold his ground and was forced to draw several steps backward and was about to fall sitting down on the ground. The man in blue robe moved extremely fast; he flew over Wei Bi's shoulder and reached out to steady him so that Wei Bi was able to stand.

"Father!" Zhu Jiuzhen called out.

"Zhu Bo Fu [paternal (older) uncle]!" Wu Qingying called out.

Wei Bi gasped for breath, and then called out, "Jiujiu [maternal uncle]!"

This man was indeed Zhu Jiuzhen's father, Zhu Changling. Wei Bi's broken arm injury was not a small matter, the servant in charge of the dogs in the Ling Ao Ying [spirit mastiff camp] rushed toward the main hall to inform their master. Zhu Changling hurriedly came and saw the three people were surrounding Zhang Wuji. After standing on the side to watch for a while, he saw that Wei Bi launched a killer strike, so he intercepted the attack to save Zhang Wuji's life.

Zhu Changling cast a sidelong glance toward his daughter and Wei and Wu, two people. His face was filled with rage. Suddenly he slapped his daughter's face with the back of his hand and roared, "Very good! Very good! The Zhu family descendants are making a good progress. I have such a sweet daughter, will I still have a face to see our ancestors in the nether world later on?"

Since her childhood, Zhu Jiuzhen had always been pampered by her parents; they had never even reprimanded her with harsh words, but today unexpectedly her father slapped her heavily in public. In that instant her head spun and she was at a loss about what to do. It was not until a moment later that she broke up crying.

"Stop it! Don't cry!" Zhu Changling sternly said. His voice was full of authority and power, shaking the dust on the beam that it rained down. Zhu Jiuzhen was so terrified that she stopped crying at once.

Zhu Changling said, "From generation to generation, our Zhu family has always been upholding chivalry. Your ancestor Ziliu Gong ['gong' is a general term to address a

male senior/elder] worked under the Yideng Dashi as the Prime Minister of the Dali kingdom. Later on he fought to defend Xiangyang, his name spread out throughout the world. Now, he could be called a hero, don't you think? Who would have thought that his descendants are unworthy? I, Zhu Changling, have this kind of daughter, three adults surrounding a child, wanting to take his life. Tell me, isn't that shameless? Isn't that shameless?" He was berating his daughter, but when Wei Bi and Wu Qingying heard him, it was as if each word was a stab of knife to their hearts that they felt so ashamed that it was a total loss of face for them.

Zhang Wuji was hurt all head to toe and almost fainted, but he gritted his teeth to stay standing. His mind was still clear, however, he was able to hear everything Zhu Changling had said. His admiration grew, and thinking in his heart, "Right and wrong is clearly distinguished, this is the sign of a true hero."

He saw Zhu Changling was so furious that the skin on his face looked sallow, his entire body trembled, his breathing fast. Wei Bi and the others, three people, hung their heads low, they did not dare to meet his eyes at all. Zhang Wuji also noticed that Zhu Jiuzhen's face was swollen big; it was obvious that her father's slap was indeed not light. She looked ashamed and scared at the same time, truly pitiful; she looked as if she wanted to cry, yet she did not dare to. Zhang Wuji bit his own lower lip and said, "Laoye, this does not concern Miss." He was startled by his own voice, for his voice was hoarse and almost inaudible. Turned out his throat was hit hard by Wei Bi earlier.

Zhu Changling continued, "This Xiao Xiongdi's [little brother] fists and kicks did not follow any specific method. It is obvious that he has never bowed to anybody and received proper martial art training. All the while he was relying on

brute force and bravery, staking everything to defend himself. He has made others admire him even more. The three of you have bullied someone who does not know martial art. Don't you remember anything your master and elders and your parents instructed?"

His words were harsh and his countenance stern; he had unexpectedly showed the least bit of leniency toward Wei Bi and Wu Qingying. Listening to him, Zhang Wuji was frightened and anxious instead. Zhu Changling also asked Zhang Wuji how he came to the manor, how he came to wear a servant's attire, while at the same time he also called someone to fetch medicine and some paste to mend broken bones to treat Wei Bi and Zhang Wuji's injuries.

Zhu Jiuzhen knew her father was furious and so she did not dare to conceal anything. She told him how Zhang Wuji protected the little monkey, how he was attacked by the pack of dogs, and how she rescued him and took him to the manor.

The more Zhu Changling heard, the deeper his frown was; when his daughter finished her narration, he sternly said, "Out of chivalry this Zhang Xiongdi protected the little monkey; that fact shows his heroism, yet you have unexpectedly treated him as a servant. If this matter is spread out later, the Jianghu warriors will all say that I, 'Jing Tian Yi Bi' [One Pen Shocking the Heavens] Zhu Changling, am a heartless, unjust disciple. You are raising these malicious dogs, I only knew that you love to play with them, and that's fine with me. Who would have thought that you dare to be reckless and use them to hurt others? If I don't kill you, this little girl, today, how can I, Zhu Changling still have a face to take part in the Wulin world?"

Realizing her father was really angry, Zhu Jiuzhen bent her knees and kowtowed on the ground. "Father," she said,

“Child will not dare anymore.”

Zhu Changling’s rage continued, Wei Bi and Wu Qingying also knelt down to beseech him. Zhang Wuji also opened his mouth, “Laoye ...”

Zhu Changling busily said, “Xiao Xiongdi, how could you call me ‘Laoye’ [old/senior master]? I am only several years older than you are. At most you can call me ‘Qian Bei’ [senior/older generation], that would be enough.”

“Yes, yes, Zhu Qian Bei,” Zhang Wuji said, “You cannot blame Miss over this matter; her actions were by no means intentional.”

“Look at that,” Zhu Changling said, “A young boy like him is very broad-minded and loving; how can the three of you rise above that? Today is the New Year’s Day, also Miss Wu is our guest, actually I should have not gotten angry, but this matter should not have happened at all. It was an act of cowardice, the act of the lowly characters of the ‘black way’, how could someone from the ‘chivalrous way’ like us do such thing? Since Xiao Xiongdi has interceded for you, you can all rise.”

Swallowing their shame, Wei Bi and the others, three people, stood up. Zhu Changling turned toward the servant who feeds the dogs and shouted, “Where are those malicious dogs? Take them here.” The servant complied and took the dogs out.

Zhu Jiuzhen saw the dark expression on her father’s face and wondered what he was about to do. “Father,” she called in low voice.

With a cold laugh Zhu Changling said, “You raised these

dogs to harm others. All right, tell them to bite me.”

Zhu Jiuzhen cried. “Father,” she was sobbing, “Daughter realizes her mistake.”

“Humph,” Zhu Changling sneered and walked toward the vicious dogs. ‘Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!’ four times, the skulls of four big vicious dogs, as big and vicious as wolves, were shattered and they fell down on the ground.

The people were shocked and all were speechless. Zhu Changling punched and kicked, his palms hacked down and his fingers pierced, his body floated; a dark blue shadow circled around the courtyard, more than thirty vicious dogs were all killed without mercy. They could not even escape, let alone try to bite or attack. He was able to kill the dogs in one fell swoop, admittedly because the dogs were not under Zhu Jiuzhen’s order to attack, that is, the dogs were caught off guard; however, his action was as swift as the wind or lightning, his palm power was extremely fierce. Wei Bi, Wu Qingying and Zhang Wuji watched with their jaws dropped.

Then Zhu Changling carried Zhang Wuji lying in his arms to his own house to tend to his injuries. Before long, Mrs. Zhu and Zhu Jiuzhen came to take care of him with some medicinal soup.

After being bitten by the dogs, Zhang Wuji had lost a considerable amount of blood, his body was weakened. This time the injuries he suffered were not light, he was unconscious for several days. After his mind cleared up, he wrote his own prescription and asked the servant to prepare the medication and feed it to him, then his recovery was quicker. Seeing his divine-like medical ability, Zhu Changling was surprised and impressed.

Within these twenty-some days of recovering, Zhu Jiuzhen

often came to accompany Zhang Wuji by his bed, singing or guessing riddles, telling him stories, or simply chatting and joking, just like a big sister taking care of her ailing little brother, very attentive and considerate with meticulous care. After Zhang Wuji was strong enough to get up, Zhu Jiuzhen was still spending most of her days with Zhang Wuji. When it was time for her to train martial art with her father, she did not try to shun Zhang Wuji away; she always called him to watch on the side.

Zhu Changling had hinted twice that he had the intention of taking Zhang Wuji under his tutelage to inherit his entire martial art skill, but seeing a lack of response on Zhang Wuji's side, he no longer brought it up. But he still treated Zhang Wuji with kindness, not different than if he were one of his own disciples.

The Zhu family martial art was closely related to calligraphy. Zhu Jiuzhen was required to practice writing every day, and she always had Zhang Wuji accompany her studying the books. Ever since Zhang Wuji left the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island and came to the Central Earth, he had always wandered alone in desperation, laden with grief and misery, when had he experienced this kind of peaceful and happy days?

In the blink of an eye it was already past the middle of the second month. This particular day Zhang Wuji and Zhu Jiuzhen were practicing their calligraphy in a little study room when Xiao Feng the maid came in and reported, "Miss, Yao Er Ye [second master Yao] has returned from the Central Plains."

Zhu Jiuzhen was very happy; she tossed the pen brush away and called out, "Good! I have been waiting for him for more than half a year, now he finally comes." Pulling Zhang Wuji's

hand along he said, "Wuji Di [little brother Wuji], come and take a look, I wonder what neat things Yao Ershu [second (younger) uncle] bought for me this time." Two people walked hand-in-hand toward the main hall.

"Who is Yao Ershu?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"He is my father's sworn brother," Zhu Jiuzhen replied, "He is known as 'Qian Li Zhui Feng' [pursuing the wind for thousand 'li'] Yao Qingquan. Last year my father asked him to deliver a gift to the Central Plains. I asked him to buy some rouge cosmetics and silk fabrics from Hangzhou, and embroidery needles and patterns from Suzhou, also some Huimo [Anhui ink, known for its quality] brush and ink. I wonder if he managed to buy everything." She explained further that the Zhu family manor was located in remote Kunlun mountain range of the western region, and that fine and delicate articles could not be bought within several thousand 'li' from where they were. Kunlun Mountain was tens of thousands 'li' away from the Central Earth, to make a round trip between two places would required two, three years; therefore, if anybody was going to the Central Plains, Zhu Jiuzhen would ask him to buy large quantities of goods.

As the two of them were near the hall, they were shocked to hear the sound of crying and weeping. Upon entering the hall, their shock was even greater, since they saw Zhu Changling and a tall and slim middle-aged man were kneeling on the floor, weeping. The man was wearing white mourning garment with a straw belt on his waist.

Zhu Jiuzhen went toward and man and called out, "Yao Ershu!"

With a loud wailing Zhu Changling called out, "Zhen'Er, Zhen'Er, our great benefactor, Zhang Wu Ye [fifth master

Zhang], Zhang ... Zhang Wu Ye ... he .. he ... he died!"

Zhu Jiuzhen was startled. "How can that be?" she asked, "Zhang En Gong [benefactor master (see also my note on 'Gong' earlier) ... has been missing for ten years. So he did not return safely?"

Sobbing, Yao Qingquan said, "We live remotely so we did not receive timely information. Turned out more than four years ago Zhang En Gong and Madame committed suicide together. I heard this news on the way at Shanxi, before I even went up Mount Wudang. Upon my arrival on the mountain, I met Song Da Xia and Yu Er Xia [first hero Song and second hero Yu, respectively]. Only then did I know the truth, ay ..."

The more Zhang Wuji listened; his shock grew until finally his doubts were gone. The one they referred to as 'the great benefactor, the fifth master Zhang' was his own father, Zhang Cuishan. Seeing that Zhu Changling and Yao Qingquan were crying bitterly while Zhu Jiuzhen was also weeping with tears coming down her face, Zhang Wuji was unable to bear the urge to step forward and reveal his real identity, but then he changed his mind, "All along I did not tell them my origin, if I reveal the truth now, it is most likely that Zhu Bofu [father's elder brother, general respectful term to address an older man] and Zhen Jie [older sister] would not believe me. Perhaps they would think that I am merely trying to buy their sympathy, and then they would look down on me."

Not too long afterwards, there came a loud noise of weeping from the inner courtyard. Mrs. Zhu, holding on to a maid's shoulder, walked into the hall, while repeatedly asking Yao Qingquan question after question. In his grief and indignation, Yao Qingquan forgot to pay his respects toward

the sworn sister-in-law. Immediately he narrated again how Zhang Cuishan committed suicide.

Zhang Wuji tried hard to suppress his emotions. He did not cry openly, but tears rained down on his face. Everybody in the hall was crying, so nobody paid him any attention.

Suddenly Zhu Changling raised his palm and 'crack!' he struck the octagonal table by his side that it broke in two. "Er Di [second (younger) brother]," he said, "Tell me clearly, who had forced En Gong and En Sao [benefactor sister-in-law] to their deaths on Mount Wudang?"

"As soon as I heard the information, I should have returned quickly to report this matter to Dage [big brother]," Yao Qingquan said, "But I thought investigating the enemies' names was more important. Turned out the people who went up Mount Wudang and forced En Gong to his death were under the leadership of the Shaolin Three Divine Monks, the number of people was indeed not a few. Xiao Di [little brother – referring to self] secretly investigated everywhere, and thus was delayed several days." Thereupon he named the people from Shaolin, Kongtong, Emei, and other 'Pai' [sect], and then Hai Sha [lit. sand of the ocean], Ju Jing [gigantic whale], Shen Quan [divine fist], Wu Shan [Mount Wu, located on the Changjiang River by the Three Gorges], and other 'Bang Hui' [clan and society], who had gone up Mount Wudang to coerce Zhang Cuishan, such as Abbot Kong Wen, Reverend Kong Zhi, He Taichong, Jing Xuan Shitai, Guan Neng, and many other names.

Zhu Changling grimly said, "Er Di, these people are among the best of the Wulin characters of the present age; we can't provoke even one of those people. However, Zhang Wu Ye's kindness on us was as heavy as the mountain; we must avenge his deep enmity even if our bodies were ground into

powder and our bones were broken into pieces.”

Wiping his tears, Yai Qingquan said, “Dage is right, we owe our two lives to Zhang Wu Ye. In any case we are able to live these dozen of years, so if we must lose our lives for Zhang Wu Ye’s sake, that is only appropriate. What Xiao Di regrets most is that I was not able to meet Zhang Wu Ye’s young master; otherwise I would be able to convey Dage’s good intention. It would be best if we can invite him here, then we can give him everything we have and take a good care of him the rest of his life.”

Mrs. Zhu prattled incessantly, asking in details about this Zhang Gongzi [young master]. Yao Qingquan only knew that he was seriously injured, but he did not know where he had gone to seek treatment. It seemed to be that this child was only eight, nine years old that year. Supposedly Zhang Sanfeng, Zhang Zhenren [lit. real/true person, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] was going to pass his entire martial art skill on to him, so that in the future he could take over the Sect Leader position of Wudang Pai.

Zhu Changling, husband and wife immediately kneeled down to express their thanks to the Heaven and the Earth for the future Sect Leader Zhang.

Yao Qingquan said, "Dage asked me to deliver thousand-year-old king ginseng, snow lotus herb from Tianshan, jade lion paper weight, black gold dagger and other things for Zhang En Gong; Xiao Di has left everything on Mount Wudang, asking Song Da Xia to hand them over to Zhang Gongzi."

"That's the best arrangement, that is," Zhu Changling said. Turning toward his daughter he said, "Why don't you tell Zhang Xiongdi how our family received great kindness from

our benefactor?"

Zhu Jiuzhen took Zhang Wuji's hand and led him to her father's study room. She pointed toward a large scroll of painting hanging at the center of the wall and told Zhang Wuji to take a look. On the right margin of the painting there were seven characters: 'Picture of Zhang Gong Cuishan's Kindness'.

Zhang Wuji had never been to Zhu Changling's study before, this time, as he saw his father's revered name, his eyes were clouded with tears. The background of the painting was a vast wilderness. A handsome young warrior, with left hand holding a silver hook and right hand brandishing an iron brush, was fighting a fierce battle with five fearsome looking enemies. Zhang Wuji knew this warrior must be his father. Although the face was somewhat different, he could see the slight resemblance with his own face. There were two people lying on the ground, one was Zhu Changling, the other Yao Qingquan. There were two more people with severed heads. On the lower left corner there was a young mother, her expression was full of fear. She was Madame Zhu. She was carrying a baby girl in her arms. Zhang Wuji focused his eyes and saw a small black mole on the side of this baby's mouth, so she must be Zhu Jiuzhen.

The paper of this painting had turned light yellow; apparently it was an old painting, at least ten years old. Zhu Jiuzhen pointed her finger to the painting and explained to him. Turned out shortly after Zhu Jiuzhen was born, in order to avoid strong enemies, Zhu Changling took his entire family to the west. Unfortunately, the enemy still managed to overtake them on the way. Two of his younger martial brothers were killed, while Yao Qingquan and he were also overthrown. The enemies were just about to finish them off

when Zhang Cuishan happened to pass by. Out of chivalry he beat the enemies and drove them away, and thus had saved the lives of the entire family. A simple calculation would reveal that it must have happened before Zhang Cuishan went to the Bing Huo Island.

After Zhu Jiuzhen narrated this story, her expression turned sad. She said, "We live in such a remote area that we have just found out about Zhang En Gong's return from overseas last year. Father had made an oath that he would not tread his feet on the Central Plains even for one step; thereupon he imposed upon Yao Ershu to deliver the precious gifts to Mount Wudang and pay his respects, who would have thought ..." While she was still talking, a young servant of the study room came in and invited her to the mourning hall to pay her respects.

Zhu Jiuzhen hurriedly went out the room. After changing her clothes to a plain white gown, together with Zhang Wuji they went to the rear hall. There were two memorial tablets arranged in the hall. White candles were burning high. One of the memorial tablets bore this inscription: 'En Gong Zhang Daxia Hui Cuishan Zhi Lingwei' [the memorial tablet of benefactor Great Hero Zhang, revered name Cuishan]. The other one had 'Zhang Furen Yin Shi Zhi Lingwei' [the memorial tablet of Mrs. Zhang of the Yin family]. Zhu Changling, husband and wife, along with Yao Qingquan were kneeling on the floor, weeping with grief.

Zhang Wuji followed Zhu Jiuzhen, together they also kowtowed. Zhu Changling stroke his head and with a choking voice said, "Xiao Xiongdi, very good, very good. This Zhang Daxia was generous and big hearted, a remarkable man, truly unparalleled in the present age. Although you do not know him, he was not your relative or acquaintance, yet you pay your respects to him. It is very

appropriate."

Faced with this situation, Zhang Wuji had even less reason to confess that he was the Benefactor Zhang's child, thinking, "The rumor Yao Ershu heard was incorrect, he said I am no older than eight, nine years of age; if I confess now, it would be more difficult for them to believe."

"Dage," suddenly Yao Qingquan said, "About that Xie Ye [Master Xie] ..." Zhu Changling coughed and made an eye signal. Yao Qingquan immediately changed the subject, "What should we do about the thanksgiving sacrifice? Shall we hold a funeral for the Benefactor?"

"You take care of it!" Zhu Changling replied.

Zhang Wuji thought, "You were obviously saying 'Xie Ye'; how come suddenly changed into 'xie yi' [thanksgiving offering]? [Translator's note: the same 'Xie' (thank you) character, so in Chinese the two words did not differ too much.] Xie Ye, Xie Ye? Could he be talking about my Yifu [foster/adoptive father]?"

That night he remembered his departed father and mother, as well as his Yifu who was spending the rest of his life on the cold island of the extreme north. His mind was full of disquieting thoughts; how could he sleep soundly?

By the dawn the next day, he heard intermittent footsteps, while his nose caught a delicate fragrance, followed by Zhu Jiuzhen entering his room carrying a basin of water in her hands to wash his face with.

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Zhen Jie, what ... what are you doing?" he asked.

Zhu Jiuzhen said, "All the servants and maids have left

completely. What's wrong with me taking care of you?"

Zhang Wuji was even more surprised. "What ... what happened? Why did they leave?"

"My father told them to leave last night," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "He gave every one of them some money and sent them back to their homes. It is too dangerous in here." After a short pause she continued, "After you wash your face, Father wants to have a word with you."

Zhang Wuji quickly washed his face without taking too much care. Zhu Jiuzhen combed his hair, and then together they walked toward Zhu Changling's study. There were originally seventy, eighty servants in this big building complex, but now it looked cold and empty, not even one person was to be seen.

Seeing the two of them walk in, Zhu Changling said, "Zhang Xiongdi, I very much admire your chivalrous heart and heroic spirit. Actually, I wanted to keep you in my humble home for eight or ten years, but now that we are suddenly on the brink of an unforeseen incident, we must part. Zhang Xiongdi you must not have questions in your heart." While saying that, he presented a tray; on the tray there were twelve gold ingots and twelve silver ingots, plus a self-defense dagger. He said, "This is a small token just to remember your meeting with a simple-minded couple and their daughter, I ask Zhang Xiongdi to accept. If the old man can keep his life, we will meet again in the future ..." Speaking to this point, his voice broke, he sobbed and was unable to continue.

Zhang Wuji stepped aside to evade the gift. He boldly said, "Zhu Bobo [(older) paternal uncle], although your nephew is young and useless, he is not one who covets life and fears

death. As your family is facing imminent danger, there is no way nephew will go away on my own. Perhaps nephew cannot help Bofu and Jiejie in any way, but I will follow Bofu and Jiejie in life or death.

Zhu Changling urged him again and again, but Zhang Wuji's mind was set. "Ay!" finally Zhu Changling sighed and said, "You kid do not know danger. Alright, I will tell you the truth, but you must swear a heavy oath first, that you will not in any way divulge the secret to a second person, you also must not ask me too many questions."

Zhang Wuji kneeled down at once and with a loud and clear voice said, "The Emperor of Heaven above, the matter which Zhu Bobo will tell me, if I divulge it to other people, or ask him too many questions, let me die with random chops of knife, and bring ruin and shame upon myself."

Zhu Changling raised him up and then looked outside the door and the windows, followed by leaping up the roof. After ensuring there was no other people in all directions, he returned to the study room and said in low voice next to Zhang Wuji's ear, "What I am going to tell you, you are to remember it in your heart; you must not say anything to me, to guard against the wall with an ear." Zhang Wuji nodded.

In low voice Zhu Changling continued, "Yesterday Yao Er Di brought the news of Zhang En Gong's death, but he also brought someone home. This person is surnamed Xie, given name Xun, he is known as the Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden mane lion king] ..." Zhang Wuji was so shocked that his body trembled.

Zhu Changling continued, "This Xie Daxia and Zhang En Gong were sworn brothers, while he has tied many deep enmities with various schools and sects under the heavens.

Zhang En Gong, husband and wife committed suicide was because they were unwilling to disclose their sworn brother's whereabouts. Somehow Xie Daxia returned to the Central Earth and went into action to avenge Zhang En Gong's grievance. He has killed many enemies, but the enemy warriors are simply too many; in the end he suffered a serious injury. Yao Er Di is quick-witted; he rescued him and brought him here to escape, but we know the enemies will pursue in an instant. The adversaries are too numerous, we are absolutely helpless to withstand them. I am risking my life to repay the kindness; I determine to die together with Xie Daxia. But you have no relation whatsoever with him, why must you lose your life here? Zhang Xiongdi, I have told you everything, quickly leave! Once the enemies arrive, all jades and rocks will be burned; it will be too late to escape by then."

When Zhang Wuji heard this, his heart was burning with surprise and delight. He had never thought Yifu would come to this place. "Where is ..." he asked, but Zhu Changling's right hand quickly covered his mouth while he whispered in his ear, "Must not speak. The enemy's power is extensive; one careless word, we will jeopardize Xie Daxia's life. Have you forgotten your heavy oath just now?" Zhang Wuji nodded.

Zhu Changling said, "I have clearly told you everything. Zhang Xiongdi, although you are young, I have regarded you as a good friend and have taken you into my full confidence, concealing nothing. You must leave immediately."

Zhang Wuji said, "You have clearly explained everything to me, now I'm even more unwilling to leave."

Zhu Changling was deep in thought for a long time. Finally

he heaved a deep sigh and decisively said, "Alright! Here after we will live or die together, no need to say anything anymore. While we still have time, we must act quickly."

Immediately he took Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji and went out the door. Mrs. Zhu and Yao Qingquan had been waiting outside the door, with several cloth bundles sitting next to them, as if they were ready to take a long journey. Zhang Wuji looked to the east and gazed to the west, but did not see any sign of his Yifu. Zhu Changling ignited a paper flint to light a torch, and then aimed the fire at a spot above the main gate. Instantly fire blazed high into the sky while the fire tongues reaching out everywhere. Turned out the several hundred houses in this large building complex was already soaked with petroleum. Tianshan and Kunlunshan mountain ranges of the western region were rich with natural resources; it was common to see oil bubbling up from the earth like a fountain, which the people took to make the fire to cook their meals.

The Zhu family village consisted of splendid large buildings spread over a wide area with somewhat connected interior, but with the help of the oil, the fire spread really fast. Zhang Wuji saw how quick the richly ornamented building engulfed in the raging flame; he felt very grateful in his heart. He thought, "This is Zhu Bobo's life savings, built with countless care, but when evening comes, everything will be reduced to ashes, and all for the sake of my father and Yifu. This kind of courageous and upright man is indeed very rare in the world."

That night, Zhu Changling, husband and wife, Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji, four people slept in a cave. Zhu Changling's five trusted disciples, led by Yao Qingquan, stayed on guard duty outside the cave with weapons in their hands.

The fire was raging continuously to the end of the third day; fortunately the enemies had not arrived yet. By the evening of the third day, Zhu Changling took his wife and daughter, along with his disciples, Yao Qingquan and Zhang Wuji to go deeper into the cave, through dark long underground tunnel, toward several underground rooms with mountain rocks as their walls. The chambers were well stuffed with provisions: food and water, but it was rather hot and stuffy down there.

Zhu Jiuzhen noticed that Zhang Wuji kept wiping his face with his long sleeve. She smiled and asked, "Wuji Di [younger brother], can you guess why is it so hot in here? Do you know where we are?"

Zhang Wuji smelled strong burning odor and realized immediately, "Ah, we are underneath the original village."

"You are very smart," Zhu Jiuzhen laughed.

Zhang Wuji admired Zhu Changling's careful thinking even more. When the enemy's large-scale raid arrived, they would see the Zhu family village had been burnt down without a single tile left intact, so they would go to distant places to search, and would never have guessed that Xie Xun was actually hidden underneath the rubble. Zhang Wuji saw a closed iron door at the other end of the stone chamber, he surmised that his Yifu must be hidden inside. Although he was dying to see his Yifu and chat with him about what happened after they parted, he realized the danger they were still facing. Even Zhu Changling did not dare to talk with him, how could he act blindly without thinking? If he messed up this important matter, the loss of his own life was nothing, but he would also endanger the lives of his Yifu, as well as the entire Zhu family's, wouldn't he be responsible

for this grave offense?

After spending half a day underground, the heat gradually diminished, everybody unfolded their blankets and went to sleep. Suddenly they heard galloping hoof beats from a distant, which in a short while the noise sounded like it came directly above their heads. Someone with a gruff voice was heard saying, "This old thief Zhu Changling must be protecting that runaway Xie Xun, after them, quick!"

Although they were underground, everyone was able to hear clearly the noise above the ground. Turned out there was an iron tube from the underground chambers leading to the surface, transmitting the noise.

They heard random noise of hoof beats, which gradually went away. Altogether, there were a total of five groups of pursuing force coming and going one after another that night; people from Kunlun Pai, Kongtong Pai, and Ju Jing Bang ['great whale clan']. They could not hear the origin of the other two groups. Each group was at least seven, eight people, at most a dozen people. Their weapons made a resounding noise, their horses neighing noisily, they were all yelling and shouting evil words; the air was filled with violence that night.

Zhang Wuji thought, "If Yifu was not blind and seriously injured, would he be concerned over these tiny demons and little clowns like you?"

As the fifth group galloped away, Yao Qingquan picked up a wooden plug to cover the mouth of the iron pipe, so that the noise underground would not be accidentally heard by a passerby. But he was still speaking in a subdued voice. "I am going to check Xie Daxia's condition," he said. Zhu Changling nodded.

Yao Qingquan reached out and pulled a lever by the iron door to operate the secret mechanism, the iron door slowly opened. Carrying an oil lamp in his hand, he walked through the iron door. By this time Zhang Wuji was no longer able to endure patiently, he stood up and peeked over Yao Qingquan's back. He saw a big and tall man was lying on a couch facing in. To suddenly see his Yifus broad back, Zhang Wuji's eyes were brimming with tears of excitement.

He heard Yao Qingquan asked in a low voice, "Xie Daxia, do you feel a lot better now? Do you want to drink some water?"

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew out, the oil lamp in Yao Qingquan's hand went out immediately, followed by 'Bang!' Yao Qingquan was struck by Xie Xun's palm. He flew out of the iron door and fell heavily on the ground.

Xie Xun shouted, "Dogs of Shaolin Pai, Kunlun Pai, Kongtong Pai, come, come! Do you think Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun is afraid of you all?"

"Not good!" Zhu Changling called out, "Xie Daxia's mind is confused." Walking toward the door, he said, "Xie Daxia, we are your friends, not your enemies."

"What friends?" Xie Xun said with a cold laugh, "Are you deceiving me with sweet words?" He walked out the iron door in big strides and sent out his palm toward Zhu Changling's chest. This palm strike was so swift and fierce that the fire of the oil lamps around the room flickered continuously.

Zhu Changling did not dare to block head on, he circled around to evade. Xie Xun sent out a left punch toward his face. Zhu Changling had no choice but to parry by lifting up

his arm, his body shook and he retreated two steps backward.

Seeing this sudden turn of events, Zhang Wuji was frightened. Xie Xun's fist and palm were like a storm with incomparable speed and power. Zhu Changling did not dare to parry and withdrew repeatedly. Xie Xun's palm missed Zhu Changling and struck the rock wall nearby; debris of rock flew. If that palm had struck a human body, would he still be alive?

Xie Xun's long hair was draped on his shoulder, his eyes were like lightning, his face was full of bloodstains, his mouth continuously made 'huh, huh' noises, his palms were getting more and more violent. Mrs. Zhu and Zhu Jiuzhen were terrified, they huddled together at the corner of a wall.

Seeing Xie Xun's fist and palm arrive, Zhu Changling had no choice but shove a nearby wooden table to stop him. 'Bang! Bang!' Xie Xun punched twice and the table was smashed into smithereens.

Zhang Wuji was completely dumbfounded, his jaw dropped, because as he watched from the side, he saw that this 'Xie Xun' was definitely not his Yifu Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. His Yifu had been blind for a long time, this man's eyes were flashing bright. He saw this man's palm struck again, while Zhu Changling's back was against the rock wall, unable to take another step backwards, but he still did not try to block. "Xie Da Xia," Zhu Changling called out, "I am not your enemy, I am not going to fight you back." The man ignored his plea completely, his palm was still striking toward Zhu Changling's chest.

Zhu Changling's face bore a pained expression. "Xie Da Xia," he called out, "Do you believe me now?"

“Dog thief,” that man shouted, “Eat my fist!” as he sent out a punch.

Zhu Changling spurted out a mouthful of blood. In a trembling voice he said, “You are my benefactor’s sworn brother; although you beat me to death, I will never fight you back.”

With a wild laugh that man said, “It’s best that you don’t fight back, it will be easier for me to kill you.” With a left punch followed by a right punch he struck Zhu Changling’s chest and abdomen.

“Ah!” with a miserable cry Zhu Changling’s crumpled body slid down to the ground. The big man showed no mercy and punched again. Zhang Wuji quickly stepped forward risking his life, he raised his arm to block. He felt that the power behind this punch was tremendous. As soon as he was shaken, he almost fainted. At that moment, forgetting about life and death he called out, “You are not Xie Xun, you are not ...”

The big man was furious. “What does a little rascal like you know?” He lifted his leg to kick him.

Zhang Wuji rolled sideways to avoid the kick, while shouting, “You pretend to be Jin Mao Shi Wang with evil intentions, you are a fake! A fake ...”

Zhu Changling had already been sitting wearily on the ground, but listening to Zhang Wuji’s cry, he struggled to crawl back up. Pointing his finger toward the big man he called out, “You ... you are not ... you deceived me ...” Suddenly he spurted another mouthful of blood, which shot toward that man’s face. He fumbled forward and while

falling, he struck to seal the 'shen feng xue' [divine grace acupoint] under that man's right breast.

Actually, after being wounded, Zhu Changling was not that man's match. But when he spurted blood and fell forward, he took the man by surprise and struck his vital acupoint using the special family skill 'Solitary Yang Finger'.

After sealing two other acupoints on that man's waist, Zhu Changling could not hold himself any longer and passed out on the ground. Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji rushed forward and quickly held him up.

A moment later, Zhu Changling regained his consciousness and asked Zhang Wuji, "He ... he ..."

Zhang Wuji said, "Zhu Bobo, I cannot hide the truth from you anymore; the one you call benefactor was my father. Jin Mao Shi Wang is my Yifu. How could I fail to recognize him?"

Zhu Changling shook his head with a bitter smile; his face showed that he was not convinced the least bit. Zhang Wuji continued, "My Yifu is blind, this man's eyes can see well, that is the biggest flaw of his disguise. My Yifu became blind overseas, of course no outsider would know. This man came here in disguise, he would not know about my Yifu's blindness."

"Wuji Di," Zhu Jiuzhen happily said, "Are you really our family's great benefactor's son? That's very good, very good!"

Zhu Changling still was not convinced. Zhang Wuji had no choice but narrated briefly how he came to be in Kunlun region. Yao Qingquan implied his disbelief by asking him all kinds of questions about the Wudang Mountain; he also

asked him the circumstances around Zhang Cuishan, husband and wife's suicide. After Zhang Wuji gave all the correct answers, only then did he believe.

Zhu Changling still felt uncomfortable. "If this boy did not tell the truth and we offended Xie Da Xia, how can that be good?"

Yao Qingquan pulled out a dagger and placed it on that man's right eye, saying, "Friend, both of Jin Mao Shi Wang's eyes are damaged. If you want to pretend to be him, then you must copy him well. I am going to help you by taking out these things first. I, the one surnamed Yao, have been deceived really bad by you; if this little brother did not expose your lie, wouldn't I deliver my Zhu Dage's life for nothing?" While saying that, he thrust the dagger forward until the tip touched that man's eyelid. He asked again, "Who are you, anyway? Why do you pretend to be Jin Mao Shi Wang?"

"If you have guts, just stab your dagger and kill me," that man angrily said, "What kind of man do you think 'Kai Bei Shou' [hand splitting the stone] Hu Bao is? Do you think you can extort any confession from me?"

"Ah," Zhu Changling exclaimed, "Kai Bei Shou Hu Bao! You are from Kongtong Pai."

Hu Bao said loudly, "All schools and sects under the heavens know that Zhu Changling wants to avenge Zhang Cuishan. As the saying goes: strike first and gain the upper hand, strike later and suffer a calamity'."

Yao Qingquan roared, "You are so malicious!" His dagger went down to stab that man's heart. But Zhu Changling reached out with his left hand to grab his wrist, saying, "Er Di, wait. What if he really is Xie Daxia? Even if we have to

die ten thousand times, we still cannot redeem our wrong.”

Yai Qingquan said, “Zhang Xiongdi has told us clearly. Dage, if you are half-hearted [orig. ‘san xin er yi’ – three hearts two intentions] and do not make a decision, it will be difficult to us to escape present disaster.”

Zhu Changling shook his head, “I would rather we receive a thousand blades than make a mistake by injuring even a strand of hair of our benefactor’s sworn brother.”

“Zhu Bobo,” Zhang Wuji said, “This man definitely is not my Yifu. My Yifu is widely known as ‘Golden Mane Lion King’, his hair is yellow. This man’s hair is black.”

Zhu Changling was deep in thought for half a day. Finally he nodded. Taking along Zhang Wuji’s hand, he said, “Xiao Xiongdi, come with me.”

The two of them went out from the stone chambers. They left the cave and walked toward a valley behind the hillside and then sat side-by-side on a piece of boulder.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” Zhu Changling said, “If this man is not Xie Daxia, naturally we must kill him, but before we make our move, I must not have the least bit of doubt in my heart; don’t you think so?”

Zhang Wuji said, “You don’t want to make any mistake, that is only natural. But this man is definitely not my Yifu. Zhu Bobo, set your heart at ease.”

“Child,” Zhu Changling sighed, “When I was young, I fell into deceitful schemes of more than a few people. Today I did not want to fight back and I received a severe injury as a result; hence I knew that I have misjudged that man. One mistake

is enough, I cannot make another one. This is a significant responsibility. My death is not to be regretted, but whatever happens, I simply must protect Xie Daxia and your safety. Actually, I wanted to ask clearly Xie Daxia's whereabouts, so that my heart can be truly at ease, but I feel that this is an inappropriate matter to ask."

Zhang Wuji's heart was deeply touched. "Zhu Bobo," he said, "For the sake of my father and Yifu, you have destroyed a million of your family properties, you also went as far as receiving this serious injury personally, how can I not trust you? Even if you did not ask about my Yifu, I certainly must tell you everything."

Thereupon he told Zhu Changling how his parents and Xie Xun were carried by the current to the Bing Huo Island, how they lived there for ten years, and how the three of them finally returned on a wooden raft; one by one he told him everything. He learned most of these events from his parents' mouths, but he was able to narrate clearly. Zhu Changling repeatedly asked questions on things that were unclear, such as how Zhang Wuji learned martial art on the Bing Huo Island, how he brought Yang Buhui to the west, how he ran into a misfortune at the Kunlun San Sheng Ao [three-sage depression (of the earth)], until he understood everything clearly. Finding that Zhang Wuji's story was without any flaw, only then did he believe him completely.

With a long sigh of relief he looked up to the sky and said, "En Gong, oh, En Gong, I am asking your spirit in Heaven to clearly be my witness: Zhu Changling will exhaust everything he has to raise Wuji Xiongdi until he grows up and becomes an adult. Only powerful enemies lie in wait on all sides, while my martial art skill is meager, in all honesty I cannot necessarily bear this heavy burden. Therefore, I pray that En Gong will bless and protect." Finished speaking, he

kneeled down on the ground and kowtowed toward the heavens. Zhang Wuji was grieved, but also full of gratitude; he also kneeled down.

Zhu Changling stood up and said, "Now I don't have even half a part of doubt. Ay! Shaolin, Emei, Kunlun, Kongtong, which one of them does not have strength in number and superior martial art? Xiao Xiongdi, previously I was determined to risk my old life to fight the enemies one by one, to repay your honorable father's great kindness. But today, comforting an orphan is an important matter, revenge comes second. Only, the earth is so vast, where can we go to escape this disaster? They managed to find even a secluded place in a remote area like mine, where can we find a more secluded place?"

After pausing for a while he continued, "Xie Daxia lives alone on the Bing Huo Island with nobody to help him. I am thinking that for these past several years, his life must be really miserable. Ay, this great hero has such an esteemed friendship with benefactor and sister-in-law; if only I can see him just once, I will die a happy man."

Hearing him talk about how his Yifu had a harsh life, alone on the Bing Huo Island, Zhang Wuji was overwhelmed with sadness. Suddenly he had an idea and blurted, "Zhu Bobo, what do you say we go to the Bing Huo Island together? My days on that island were happy, but as soon as I arrived on the Central Earth, I saw and suffered, if not murder then shedding of blood, and thus I feel alarmed and anxious."

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhu Changling said, "You really want to return to the Bing Huo Island, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji hesitated and did not answer; quietly thinking that he would not live too much longer anyway. Besides, the

voyage to the Bing Huo Island was difficult and dangerous, they might not necessarily reach their destination, and thus he should not endanger the lives of Zhu Changling and his family. The ocean was without mercy, just one slight mishap and their bodies would be buried underneath the giant billowing waves.

Zhu Changling held his hands and looked at his face, saying, "Xiao Xiongdi, you and I are not strangers to each other, any concern should be discussed openly. Do you or do you not want to return to the Bing Huo Island?" His voice was full of sincerity.

In Zhang Wuji's heart right this moment, he was tired and loathed the sinister hearts of the Jianghu people, his desire was that he would be able to see his Yifu's face one more time before he died. If only he could die in his Yifu's arms, he would ask nothing else in this life. He was unable to conceal his heart's content in front of Zhu Changling, thereupon he slowly nodded.

Zhu Changling did not waste any time by more talking; holding Zhang Wuji's hand, he took him back to the stone chamber, and said to Yao Qingquan, "That man is a traitor, no doubt about it."

Yao Qingquan nodded. With the dagger in his hand, he entered the cell. They heard Splitting Stone Hand Hu Bao's long and miserable cry, and then it stopped abruptly. Yao Qingquan walked out of the cell and closed the iron door, his dagger was dripping with fresh blood, which he casually wiped on the bottom of his boots.

Zhu Changling said, "That traitor could come here and be a mole among us, looks like our trail has been compromised; we can't stay here anymore." Immediately he led everybody

out of the stone chamber, out of the cave, and walked for more than twenty 'li', around two mountain peaks, toward a valley, and arrived at a cluster of four, five little huts by a giant tree.

It was dawn. After everybody entered the huts, Zhang Wuji noticed the plow, sickle and other farming tools in the room, as well as pots, pans and furnace, and plenty of all kinds of provisions. It appeared that to guard against his powerful enemies, Zhu Changling had prepared not a few of these safe houses. Due to his severe injury, Zhu Changling immediately laid down on a bed. Mrs. Zhu took out some long gowns made of hand-woven cloth, along with straw sandals, head scarves, and distributed everything to everybody. All of a sudden the rich family madam and miss were transformed into peasant women. Although they did not act or talk like peasants, as long as they did not come too close to outsiders, nobody would know their disguise.

They stayed in the farm house for several days. Zhu Changling treated his injury with legacy medicine from Yunnan so he enjoyed a quick recovery. Fortunately, no enemy came to pursue. With nothing to do, Zhang Wuji quietly observed everything happening around him. He saw Yao Qingquan went out every day to seek out information. Mrs. Zhu led the disciples to pack their luggage, obviously for the long journey ahead of them. Zhang Wuji knew that to repay kindness and escape the enemy, Zhu Changling had decided to bring his whole family overseas to the Bing Huo Island, and Zhang Wuji was delighted.

That night Zhang Wuji was lying on the bed, imagining that if he was lucky enough not to die and manage to reach the Bing Huo Island, he would be able to live together on the island with this elder sister Zhu Jiuzhen, whose beauty was like an immortal's. He blushed and felt his ears getting hot,

his heart was thumping madly. He also envisioned that when (older) uncle Zhu, (younger) uncle Yao meet with his foster-father, the three of them would become good friends; they would live a carefree life on the island for the rest of their lives. They would not have to be afraid that the Mongolians would massacre or push them around; they also do not need to worry about the powerful enemies of the Wulin world sneakily attacking them. If he could live that kind of life, he would not want anything else in the world. In his delight, he had forgotten about the cold poison in his body and that his own days were numbered. It was deep into the night, but he had not fallen asleep.

While he was half-asleep, suddenly he heard the door gently pushed open, someone entered his room. Zhang Wuji was slightly surprised because his nose smelled light and delicate fragrance, which was precisely the jasmine perfume Zhu Jiuzhen used daily on her clothes. Suddenly his face turned deep red, for some unknown reason he felt extremely shy.

Zhu Jiuzhen walked quietly to the bed and asked in a low voice, "Wuji Di, are you asleep?"

Zhang Wuji did not dare to answer, he closed his eyes tight, pretending to be asleep. A moment later, he felt warm fingers on his eyelids. Zhang Wuji was surprised but happy, shy but scared; he wished she would quickly get out of the room. In his heart, he held Zhu Jiuzhen with the highest respect; if he could only look into her eyes every day, he would be very satisfied. He did not have the slightest degree of dirty thoughts toward her at all; even the hope of taking her as his wife in the future had never entered his mind. This moment, to suddenly see her entering his room, how could he not lose his mind?

Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "Could Zhen Jie possibly have an important matter she needs to discuss with me in the middle of the night?" he mused. Right this moment, suddenly the 'shan zhong xue' [lit. sheep odor acupoint] in the pit of his stomach went numb, followed by 'jian zhen' [shoulder chaste(?)], 'shen zang' [divine storehouse], 'qu chi' [crooked reservoir], and 'huan tiao' [jump the hoop] acupoints were sealed one by one. He was totally taken by surprise, who would have thought that Zhu Jiuzhen came in the middle of the night to seal his acupoints?

In his disappointment he tried to reason, "Ah, perhaps Zhen Jie wanted to test my alertness although I was asleep? She'll come back tomorrow to unseal my acupoints and make fun of me. If I knew it earlier, I would have jumped and scared her as soon as she entered the room, so that tomorrow she wouldn't have anything to boast."

He saw that she quietly pushed the door open and flew out. "I'd better unseal my acupoints quickly and follow her," Zhang Wuji thought, "I will pretend to be a ghost to scare her. That should be fun." Immediately he used the acupoint unsealing technique he learned from Xie Xun. However, Zhu Jiuzhen's family legacy of 'Solitary Yang Finger' was not something to be trifled with; he had to spend the most part of an hour to release his sealed acupoints. It was because Zhu Jiuzhen did not have enough strength, and also because she did not want to awaken him, she had only used light force; otherwise, even if Zhang Wuji's acupoint unsealing techniques were more amazing, he would never be able to free himself.

When he was able to stand up, he hurriedly put his outer garment on and jumped out of the window, but it was quiet everywhere he looked, not a trace of Zhu Jiuzhen to be seen.

Standing in the darkness he was feeling rather dispirited, but suddenly he had another thought, "Zhen Jie is going to make fun of me for being useless; let her tease me if she want to, why should I fight over who wins who loses with her? I always try to win her favor daily, it is not easy; if I pursue her tonight, she may be angry with me instead." Having this thought, his heart immediately calmed down.

It was the beginning of spring, the air was filled with the light fragrance of wild flowers all around the valley. Since sleep had left him, he wandered aimlessly along a small creek. The snow on the hillside was beginning to melt; it trickled down into the creek below. Occasionally he would step on or kick small pieces of ice, creating clinking noises along the way. After walking for a while, he heard giggles coming from the woods to his left, it was Zhu Jiuzhen's voice.

Zhang Wuji was slightly startled, "Did Zhen Jie find me?" he mused. But then he heard that she was scolding in a low voice, "Biaoge, don't make a scene, or I will slap your big ears," followed by a male voice laughing gaily. Zhang Wuji did not need to hear more to know that it was of course Wei Bi.

Zhang Wuji's heart was so shaken that he almost cried; the sweet dream he had for the last half a day was completely shattered, but his mind was suddenly as bright as the snow: "Why would I think that Zhen Jie sealed my acupoints because she wanted to play a joke on me? She is afraid I might find out that she is seeing her cousin in the middle of the night." In that instant his hands went numb and his legs went weak. He also thought, "I am a homeless pauper; how can I be compared to Wei Xianggong in terms of literacy or martial art skill, manners or appearance? ['xianggong' is yet another way of saying 'mister' or 'young master']. Zhen Jie and he are related as cousins, they are a perfect match [orig.

'lang cai nu mao' - talented man, beautiful woman], truly a match made in heaven [orig. 'tian zao di she' - heaven built, the earth arranged]."

Once he accepted the fact, he gradually calmed down and sighed lightly. Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching, someone was coming from behind. Right this moment, Zhu Jiuzhen was still talking and laughing in a low voice with Wei Bi, while walking hand-in-hand toward him. Zhang Wuji did not want to be seen by them, so he hastily stepped behind a large tree to hide.

He heard the two sets of footsteps were approaching each other. Suddenly Zhu Jiuzhen called out, "Father! You ... you ..." her voice trembled, apparently she was very scared. Turned out the person coming from the other side was none other than Zhu Changling.

Seeing his daughter having a tryst in the middle of the night with his sister's son, Zhu Changling was really angry. "Humph," he snorted, "What are you doing here?"

Zhu Jiuzhen forced herself to act like she did not care, she said with a laugh, "Father, Biaoge and I have not seen each other for such a long time, today he happened to come by, we are just chatting."

"You, this little girl, are recklessly too bold," Zhu Changling said, "What if Wuji finds out ..."

"I lightly sealed five of his major acupoints," Zhu Jiuzhen cut him off, "He is sleeping soundly right now. I am going to release him as soon as I am back, I am sure he will not know anything."

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, "Zhu Bobo knew I like Zhen Jie. Because of my father's kindness to him, he does not want

me to be broken hearted and lose heart. Actually, although I like Zhen Jie, I do not have any other intentions. Zhu Bobo, you are very good to me."

He heard Zhu Changling say, "Even so, you must be very careful, don't let us fail at the last hurdle and raise his suspicions."

Zhu Jiuzhen said with a smile, "Child understands."

"Jiufu [(maternal) uncle], Zhen Mei [younger sister]," Wei Bi said, "I'd better return. I am afraid Shifu is waiting for me."

Zhu Jiuzhen did not want to part with him too soon, she said, "Let me walk you off."

"Alright," Zhu Changling said, "Let me go with you, I need to talk to your Shifu a little bit. This time we are going to Bing Huo Island, everybody must be fully prepared, we can't afford any mistakes." And then the three of them walked toward the west.

Zhang Wuji felt rather strange; he knew Wei Bi's master was called Wu Lie, which was Wu Qingying's father. Listening to Zhu Changling, it seemed like the Wu family, father and daughter, along with Wei Bi, will be going to the Bing Huo Island too; why didn't anybody tell him before? The more people knew about this matter, the greater the possibility that it would leak out; hopefully nothing would implicate his Yifu.

He pondered about this for half a day. Suddenly he recalled something: Zhu Changling had said, 'don't let us fail at the last hurdle and raise his suspicions'. Suspicion ... suspicion ... what suspicion? Thinking about this word 'suspicion', suddenly something else flashed through his mind as if

someone had just lighted a light in the darkness of his mind; the people in the painting 'Picture of Zhang Gong Cuishan's Kindness' all bore close resemblance to the real ones, but how come his father's oval face was painted as square? He looked a lot like his father, true, because as father and son, they shared many similar facial features; however, his father face was oval with pointy chin, not at all like Zhang Wuji's long face with square jaw. According to Zhu Changling, he drew the painting with his own hand more than ten years ago. Even if his painting technique was not good, he should not make such a blatant mistake that the face of his great benefactor was changed beyond recognition. The Zhang Cuishan in the painting was practically a grown up version of Zhang Wuji.

"Ah, there is one more thing," he mused, "Father's iron pen had a straight handle with sharp nib; it looked just like ordinary writing brush. That day, not long after we arrived on the main land, he bought a regular judge pen from a weapon maker. He said that in term of weight and length, the weapon was acceptable for him to use, even with an extra iron hand. It did not look too pleasing to the eye. Mama said that as soon as we were settled, he should go and have one cast to his specifications. Yet the weapon Father had in the painting was actually a regular judge pen with a cast iron in the shape of a hand. Zhu Bobo himself is an expert in using judge pen, how could he paint it incorrectly? How could he draw Father's judge pen wrong?"

Thinking to this point, a faint feeling of dread started to grow in his heart. In the deepest part of his heart, he knew the answer, but the answer was too frightening, so he did not dare to think it clearly, he only tried to console himself, "I must not let my imagination run wild; Zhu Bobo treats me this good, why should I suspect him blindly? I'd better go back and sleep, if they knew I wander around in the middle

of the night, I might put my own life in jeopardy." As soon as he thought about 'his life in jeopardy', he shivered involuntarily, although he did not know for sure why he should be afraid.

After standing on that place for half a day, he could not stop himself from walking toward the direction Zhu Changling, father and daughter, took. He saw a flicker of fire light like a star among the thick cluster of trees. Turned out there was another house in the middle of the woods. His heart was thumping wildly and immediately he stepped more lightly as he walked quietly toward the house. Arriving at the back of the house, he calmed himself down and peeked inside through a crack on the window. He saw Zhu Changling, father and daughter, and Wei Bi were sitting facing the window, talking with someone. There were two other people in the room, their backs were facing Zhang Wuji that he could not see their faces, but one of them was a woman, which obviously was one of the 'Two Beauties of the Snowy Range', Wu Qingying. The other was a big and tall man, listening to Zhu Changling talking about how they were going to disguise themselves as merchants and set sail from Shandong region. He did not say a single word, only nodded repeatedly.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Aren't I afraid over imaginary fears? Most likely this gentleman is the master of Wu family village, Wu Lie. He is a good friend of Zhu Bobo, so he is invited to come to the Bing Huo Island together. That is only natural, why should I make such a fuss over nothing?"

"Father," he heard Wu Qingying say, "What if we cannot find that small island in the boundless ocean, and then we cannot return home? What should we do, then?"

Zhang Wuji mused, "This gentleman is indeed the Village

Master Wu.”

He heard Wu Lie reply, “If you are scared, then you should stay home. It is the matter of this world, if we do not go through hardship and suffering, how can we achieve peace and happiness?”

“I was only asking,” Wu Qingying sulkily said, “Of course I will follow the lesson I’ve learned from you.”

Wu Lie laughed and said, “Actually, in this matter we are staking everything on a single throw of a dice. If we are lucky, we will get to the Bing Huo Island. Even if that Xie Xun’s martial art skill is higher, he is still only one person, much less he is blind. He is certainly not our match ...” Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji felt a cold air creeping up his back; he could not help but shiver. In the meantime, Wu Lie continued, “... how could we not take that Tulong Saber away from him? When that happens, the ‘ruling under the heavens, no one dares to disobey’, your Zhu Bobo and I together will become the ‘most revered in the Wulin world’. However, if our plan is not in accordance with the Heaven’s will [orig. ‘ren suan bu ru tian suan’ – man’s calculation is inferior to the Heaven’s calculation. I remember this saying has its origin from the Three Kingdoms, but I do not have the exact reference.], we will end up dead in the sea. Humph, who in the world would not eventually die?”

Wei Bi said, “I heard Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun’s martial art skill is outstanding. On Wangpan Mountain Island, his roar had shaken dozens of Jianghu’s skilled people that they lost their minds. Disciple thinks that as we arrive on the island, we need not fight him openly; just put poison in his food and drink. Let’s not say that he is blind, even if his eyes are well and he can see clearly, he would never guess that the people his foster son brought along would harm him.”

Zhu Changling nodded. "Bi'er's idea is marvelous," he said, "Only we, Zhu and Wu, two families, from generation to generation have always been upright and chivalrous prestigious martial art school; we have never used poison, even on our secret projectiles we have never put poison. In short, I do not know anything about which poison we should put in his food and drink without raising his suspicions."

Wei Bi said, "Yao Ershu goes to the Central Plains a lot, he should know. Ask him to buy some prepared poison."

Wu Lie turned around to pat Zhu Jiuzhen's shoulder, he said with a smile, "Zhen'er ..." As he turned his head around, Zhang Wuji was able to see his face and he was shocked! Turned out this man was the 'Hand Splitting Rock' Hu Bao who masqueraded as his Yifu, who struck Zhu Changling that he vomited some blood, who was killed by Yao Qingquan with a dagger. Zhang Wuji understood immediately, everything was a charade. In order to make the charade lifelike, the palm strike, the hit against the wall so that rock debris fall down, the smashing of the table, had to be performed by Wu Lie, whose martial art skill was very strong.

Wu Lie was saying to Zhu Jiuzhen with a laugh, "Speaking about which, you have an important role to play in this drama; you have to be affectionate toward that little rascal along the way until he has delivered Xie Xun's life. You must not reveal anything that would give our scheme away."

"Father," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You must promise me one thing."

"What is it?" Zhu Changling asked.

"You want me to wait upon that little rascal," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You don't know how much suffering I have to endure these last several days. From here until we get to the Bing Huo Island and kill Xie Xun, I don't know how many more hardships I have to bear. As soon as you take the Tulong Saber, I want to use it to kill that little rascal!"

Listening to such hateful and malicious talk, Zhang Wuji vision blackened and he almost fainted. Indistinctly he heard Zhu Changling say, "We are using this kind of trick to deceive him only to find out Jin Mao Shi Wang's whereabouts. Strictly speaking, we should not do this. This kid is not a bad kid. After we kill Xie Xun and get the Tulong Saber, pierce this kid's eyes blind, and leave him on the Bing Huo Island; that should be enough."

Wu Lie praised him, "Zhu Dage has a benevolent heart, he does not want to fail the family's chivalrous values."

Zhu Changling sighed, "This is like we are taking one step in chess, no feelings should be involved. Wu Erdi [second (younger) brother], when we are sailing, you must follow us from a distance. If you are too close, you might raise that kid's suspicion, but if you are too far, we might lose contact. You may have to take the trouble of selecting skilled sailors to man your boat."

"Yes," Wu Lie replied, "Zhu Dage's plan is truly thorough."

Zhang Wuji was confused. "I have never revealed my true identity, how could they find out?" he mused, "Hmm, perhaps when I staked everything to fight Wei Bi and Zhu and Wu girls, I used Wudang Pai's techniques. Zhu Bobo's experience is vast; perhaps he could instantly see my origin. He knew that my father and mother would rather die than revealing Yifu's whereabouts. Supposing he has used force,

he could not make me reveal the truth; therefore, he forged the painting, burned down his own residence, using the ruse of inflicting self-injury to move my heart. Without uttering a single sentence of request, I asked him to take me to the Bing Huo Island instead. Zhu Changling, oh Zhu Changling, your sinister plot is truly ruthless."

By this time Zhu Changling and Wu Lie were still discussing all kinds of preparations for their journey to the east. Zhang Wuji did not dare to listen further, he held his breath and quietly lifted his foot and quietly put it down. For every single step he had to listen and make sure there was nothing astir inside before he took the next step. He realized Zhu Changling and Wu Lie's martial art skills were very strong, as soon as he made a careless step, stepping on a dry twig, for instance, he would alert them at once. Hence, for the first thirty steps or so, he walked very slowly. It was not until he was more than ten 'zhang' away from the little hut did he quicken his pace.

In his panic he did not see where he was heading, he only thought that he must have walked toward the deepest part of the forest on the hillside. He climbed higher and higher, and faster and faster, until finally he ran like a madman. He did not dare to slow down or stop to catch his breath for more than two hours.

After running for half of the night, finally it was dawn. He noticed that he was inside a deep forest on a mountain range. He turned his head to see if Zhu Changling and the others pursued him or not, but as soon as he turned and looked, he cried out in desperation, because his feet made deep prints on the snow as far as he could see. The western regions were bitterly cold, although it was already the beginning of spring; the snow had not melted in between the mountain ridges. Running for his life in panic, with all his

strength he managed to climb the mountain ridge; who would have thought that he had left a very clear track of his whereabouts.

From where he was, Zhang Wuji could hear a faint howling of wolves ahead; it was sad and shrill, but also frightening. He walked toward the edge of a cliff and saw on the opposite hillside seven, eight large grey wolves looking up at him, baring their teeth and howling threateningly. Obviously the wolves wanted to eat their fill, but between them there was a bottomless canyon, perhaps tens of thousands 'zhang' deep, so the wolves would not be able to reach him. Turning his head again, his heart skipped a beat, for he saw on the hillside there were five dark shadows slowly creeping upward; they must be the people from the Zhu and Wu families. Presently they were still some distance away, it seemed like these five people did not walk too fast, but he knew that they were rushing like the wind that they would be able to catch up with him in less than two hours.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and made a decision, "I'd rather die by becoming food for the hungry wolves than fall into their hands and have to suffer torment from this group of evil people."

He thought about how stupid he was to hold Zhu Jiuzhen in the highest esteem, hidden away under her beauty was a heart as poisonous as a viper or a scorpion. In shame and grief he staggered to enter the dense forest.

The grass in the forest was as tall as his waist, although there was accumulation of snow, his trail could not be seen easily. After running for a while, his body and mind were overcome by weariness, plus the cold poison in his body suddenly flared up, his legs gave up that he was unable to move further. He crawled into a clump of long grass and

picked a sharp rock from the ground. He held the rock tight, thinking that as soon as Zhu Changling and the others find his hiding place, he would kill himself by striking the sharp rock on his 'taiyang xue' [sun acupoint, located on the temple].

Thinking back on everything he went through in the last two months in the Zhu family manor, his heartache grew. "Kongtong Pai, Huashan Pai, Kunlun Pai people repaid kindness with evil, I did not keep their wickedness in my heart. But toward Zhen Jie I had nothing but sincerity, yet in the end it comes to this ... Ay, what did Mama tell me before her death? How could I forget her warning?"

Just before she died, Zhang Wuji's mother had clearly whispered in his ear this warning, 'Child, when you grow up, you must be cautious of women tricking you. The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be.' His eyes were brimming with tears as he vaguely recalled what happened that day. "Mama said those words with a dagger already thrust into her chest. She endured the severe pain just to warn me, but I did not keep the words she uttered through blood and tears in my heart. If I did not know the unsealing acupoint technique and by curious coincidence heard Zhu Changling's conspiracy, I would have fallen into their thorough scheme and would have brought them to the Bing Huo Island; then I would certainly bring harm to Yifu's life."

As his mind was made up, his brain became exceptionally clear; he was able to see the meaning behind Zhu Changling, father and daughter's actions. When Zhu Changling realized he was Zhang Cuishan's son, he went into action by killing the dogs and slapping his daughter, so that Zhang Wuji would believe that he was the kind of man who clearly distinguish right from wrong, a righteous man who

upheld chivalry. Although the setting of his large complex of elaborately decorated buildings in flame was something to be pitied, it was nothing compared the 'Wulin Zhi Zun' [the most revered in the Wulin world] Tulong Saber. Just from the quick-thinking and decisive way of handling matters, Zhu Changling was indeed worthy to be feared.

Zhang Wuji also thought, "When I was on the island, every day I have seen Yifu held the Saber in his hand, lost in thought. For ten years he was not able to penetrate the secret of the Saber. Although Yifu is intelligent, he is a straightforward man. This Zhu Changling's resourcefulness surpasses others. Speaking about the depth of his scheme, he is far above Yifu. Yifu cannot solve the mystery, but if the treasured Saber fell into Zhu Changling's hands, most likely he would succeed ..." Carefully thinking it over, all sorts of scenarios jumbled around in his head. Suddenly he heard footsteps. Zhu Changling and Wu Lie had entered the forest.

Wu Lie said, "That kid must be hiding in the forest, he won't run far ..."

Zhu Changling quickly cut him off, he said, "Ay, I wonder what did Zhen'er say that she offended Zhang Xiongdi. I am really worried over him; he is such a young boy, if he met a mishap on these snowy and icy mountain ridges, even if my body is ground to powder and my bones shattered, I would never forgive myself in front of Zhang En Gong."

These words were spoken with extreme anxiety, as if he deeply regretted himself. Zhang Wuji was completely horrified to hear him, he thought, "He has not given up hope; he still wants to deceive me with flowery speech."

He heard that Zhu and Wu, two men, were beating the bushes with three branches in their hands. Zhang Wuji

crouched even lower and did not dare to make the slightest move. Fortunately, that forest covered a very large area that although they beat the bushes for a while they still could not find him. Shortly afterwards, Wei Bi and the Two Beauties of the Snowy Range also arrived. The five of them searched the forest for half a day without finding anything. They grew tired and sat on rocks to rest. Actually, the place they were resting was less than three 'zhang' away from Zhang Wuji's hiding place; it was just that the grass in this forest was really tall that he was completely hidden from their sight.

Zhu Changling focused his attention and thought for a moment, suddenly he loudly shouted, "Zhen'er, how have you offended Wuji Xiongdi that he left in the middle of the night without telling us?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was startled. Zhu Changling busily signaled her with his eyes, but from his hiding place among the thick grass, Zhang Wuji actually was able to see this signal clearly.

Zhu Jiuzhen understood, she also replied in loud voice, "I was just joking with him, I sealed his acupoints, I did not know that Wuji Di will take it seriously." Finished speaking, she called out loudly, "Wuji Di, Wuji Di, quickly come out, Zhen Jie wants to apologize to you." Although her voice was loud, it still carried a flirtatious and seducing tone, coaxing Zhang Wuji to respond.

After calling for a moment without anything astir, suddenly she cried, "Father, don't hit me, don't hit me. I did not intentionally offend Wuji Di." Zhu Changling raised his palm and slapped his own thigh, making loud slapping noises, while his mouth was shouting angrily. Zhu Jiuzhen did not stop screaming miserably, as if she could not bear the pain of her father's beating. Wu Lie, Wei and Wu Qingying looked

from the side with smiles on their faces.

Zhang Wuji saw the drama performed by this pair of father and daughter, but hearing the noise, his heart was still sorrowful. He thought, "Luckily I can see your faces, otherwise, hearing her shrill screaming, although I know it is harmful to me, I would not be able to bear it and would have stepped forward."

Zhu family's father and daughter were certain that Zhang Wuji was hiding in this forest; one cursed angrily, the other cried pitifully, their voices grew more and more severe. Zhang Wuji covered his ears with his hands, but intermittently, the voice still penetrated his ears. Finally he could not bear it anymore, he leaped out and shouted, "Whatever trick you are playing, do you think you can still deceive me?"

Zhu Changling and the others, all five of them, cheered together, "He is here!"

Zhang Wuji called out, "Zhen Jie, how are you?" and then turned around and dashed like crazy into the woods. Zhu Changling and Wu Lie flew to pounce on him at once. Zhang Wuji had made up his mind to die, hence without hesitation he ran toward that tens of thousands 'zhang' deep canyon. Zhu Changling's 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was far superior to Zhang Wuji; as soon as Zhang Wuji rushed toward the nearby canyon, Zhu Changling had already very near behind him, reaching out to grab the clothes on his back.

Zhang Wuji felt a severe pain to the bones as the five fingers of Zhu Changling's right hand tightly held his back. By this time, however, his foot had already treaded on empty air; half of his body was already above the abyss. His left foot followed and his entire body was thrown rapidly forward.

Zhu Changling had never imagined that Zhang Wuji would throw himself over the cliff to commit suicide. Because he was holding Zhang Wuji's back, he was also pulled forward. Based on his dozens of years of martial art training, if he released his hand and immediately leaped backward, he would have preserved his life. However, he knew that as soon as he let his five fingers loose, he would forever lost the chance to get his hand on 'the most revered in the Wulin world', the treasured Tulong Saber. These past two months of painstaking planning and preparation, the burning of his vast magnificent dwelling complex to the ground, all would be wasted as soon as he let these five fingers loose.

In his hesitation, Zhang Wuji's fall did not slow down the least bit. 'Not good!' Zhu Changling called out, while reaching back with his left hand, trying to grab the hand of Wu Lie, who was running close behind him, but he missed by about a foot, yet he was still unwilling to let his grab on Zhang Wuji go. Two people fell together over the cliff, into the tens of thousands 'zhang' deep abyss below. They only heard Wu Lie, Zhu Jiuzhen and the others cry out in alarm above, but in a blink of an eye their voices were no longer heard.

The two of them fell straight down through the clouds and mist in the valley. In all his life, Zhu Changling had endured not just a few wind and waves; his mind stayed clear in this critical time. He felt the howling wind rushing past his ears as his body fell downward. Occasionally he would see tree branches extended from the wall of the cliff. He tried to reach out and grab these branches, but several times he missed by a few feet. Finally he succeeded, but the force of gravity on their bodies was simply too strong, the branch was unable to bear the load, 'crack!' the pine branch, as big as a human arm, snapped. But this slight slowing down was enough for Zhu Changling to swing his legs, using the move

'wu long jiao zhu' [black dragon entangles the pillar], and wrap them firmly around the trunk of the pine tree. Next, he swung Zhang Wuji and sat him on a branch. For fear that Zhang Wuji would leap down again, he kept holding on to Zhang Wuji's arm.

Seeing that in the end he was still unable to escape from Zhu Changling's grasp, Zhang Wuji was extremely disheartened. "Zhu Bobo," he bitterly said, "No matter how you would torture me, don't ever think that I would take you to look for my Yifu."

Zhu Changling heaved his own body up and steadied himself sitting on the branch. Looking up, he could no longer see Zhu Jiuzhen and the others; he did not even hear their shouts anymore. Although he was gutsy, recalling that he had just narrowly cheated death, he could not stop cold sweats from trickling down his forehead.

After calming himself down, he said with a smile, "Xiao Xiongdi, what are you talking about? I don't understand anything. Please don't let your imagination run wild."

"I have seen through your crafty scheme," Zhang Wuji said, "It is completely useless against me. If you force me to take you to the Bing Huo Island, I can randomly point to north, south, east or west; then everybody will die together in the ocean. Do you think I will not dare to do just that?"

Zhu Changling thought that he was telling the truth; right now there was no way he could argue with him face to face, his only hope was for another ingenious plan involving his daughter. He looked around to assess their situation. Climbing back up was certainly not an option. Looking down, he still cannot see the bottom, besides, even if he could reach the canyon ground, nine out of ten there would be no

way out. The only possibility was to slowly crawl along the sloping mountain wall.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” he said to Zhang Wuji, “You must not have any blind suspicion. I assure you, I simply will not compel you to find Xie Daxia. If I did, let ten thousand arrows penetrate this body of mine, and I the one surnamed Zhu die without a burial place.” His heavy oath was not empty words, because he thought that since Zhang Wuji had attempted suicide, he knew that it would be useless no matter how he compelled. His only hope was to entice him to willingly bring this matter up.

Hearing his oath, Zhang Wuji was somewhat relieved. Zhu Changling said, “We will have to slowly crawl up from here. You must not jump down, do you understand?”

“If you don’t compel me, why would I want to seek death?” Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhu Changling nodded. Taking out his short saber, he peeled the tree bark to make some rope. He tied one end of the rope to his waist and the other to Zhang Wuji’s. Going all fours on the ground, they crawled one step at a time along the snowy mountain slope toward the sunlight high above their heads. The cliff was steep to begin with, now that it was covered with ice and snow, it was extremely slippery. Twice had Zhang Wuji slipped and fell, both times Zhu Changling exerted his strength to pull him that he did not fall into the deep canyon below. But Zhang Wuji did not appreciate his efforts at all. “If you don’t have your eyes on the treasured Tulong Saber, would you still have the good intention of saving me?” he silently thought.

Two people crawled for half of the day; their elbows and knees were scraped and bruised bloody by the hard ice, until at last the cliff was not so steep. Two people were able

to stand; step by step they struggled onward. With great difficulty they walked around a sheer cliff that seemed like a large screen and without any shame Zhu Changling cried out in despair. As far as the eyes could see, there was boundless ocean of clouds around them, there was no way out, that place was like a high and flat stage with empty air on its three sides. The circumference of the stage was more than ten 'zhang', but it was hanging in the middle of the air, they could not go up, and could not go down either; it was truly a dead-end.

This large platform was covered with ice and snow; there was no vegetation, no wild animal. Contrary to expectation, Zhang Wuji was happy, he laughed and said, "Zhu Bobo, you have planned all this wholeheartedly, and yet we end up on this suspended-from-the-sky platform. If right at this moment someone offered the treasured Tulong Saber, what would you do with it?"

"Stop talking nonsense!" Zhu Changling shouted. He sat cross-legged and ate two mouthfuls of snow, thinking, "Although I am tired right now, I still have some energy left. If stay here one more day without eating anything, I am afraid it would be hard to escape from this trap." Thereupon he stood up and said, "There is no way out from this place, we must go back and find another way out."

"I actually think it is so fun in here," Zhang Wuji replied, "Why must we go back?"

Zhu Changling angrily said, "There is nothing to eat here, why stay?"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Isn't it better not to eat human's food? Then you can cultivate the way of the immortals."

Zhu Changling was enraged, but he knew that as soon as he used force, perhaps Zhang Wuji would jump over the cliff. "All right," he said, "You can stay here and rest for a moment. As soon as I find another way out, I'll be back here to get you. Don't go too near the cliff, you might fall down."

Zhang Wuji said, "What concern it is to you if I live or die, exist or perish? If you are still dreaming of me leading you to the Bing Huo Island, I suggest you let it go."

Zhu Changling did not answer; he went back to where they came from. When he arrived at the big pine tree, he took the path to the left. This side of the cliff was more dangerous, but without having to look after Zhang Wuji, he managed to move faster. After more than an hour of climbing, he reached the top of the cliff. Again he did not see any way out. Zhu Changling looked over the cliff and heaved a long sigh. After staring blankly to the emptiness for a long time, he dejectedly went back to the platform.

Without asking, Zhang Wuji could see from his expression that he failed to find a way out; he thought, "I was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang [black/mysterious and dark divine palm]. The cold poison is not easy to get rid of. I won't have too much time to live. No matter where I die, it's all the same to me. On the other hand, he has been blessed but failed to enjoy it in his vain attempt to become 'the most revered in the Wulin world', that unexpectedly he has to accompany me on this world of ice and snow, and die of starvation. It's a pity, it's a pity!"

At first Zhang Wuji detested Zhu Changling for his treacherous scheme, even after they fell over the cliff together and escaped dangers, he still made fun of him several times, but as now their hope of escaping alive had

been cut short and he saw Zhu Changling hung his head dispiritedly, Zhang Wuji began to feel pity on him instead. "Zhu Bobo," he warmly said, "You are already old, you have enjoyed all kinds of splendor and happiness, if you die now, what else do you have to regret? Don't be sad."

Zhu Changling had always yielded to Zhang Wuji because he had not given up yet; he still hoped that in the end he could swindle Zhang Wuji into leading them to the Bing Huo Island. But now as he saw his path to life had been cut and he was left in this desperate situation, all because of this kid, how could he suppress his resentment? He stared menacingly toward Zhang Wuji, with eyes spouting raging fire.

Seeing the abrupt change of Zhu Changling's expression, from that of a gentle and good-natured old man to a beast, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel very scared. He cried out in fear and ran away.

"Where can you run?" Zhu Changling roared, reaching out to grab Zhang Wuji's back. He was determined to torture him really bad, he wanted Zhang Wuji to experience the worst possible pain before he died.

Zhang Wuji ducked forward one step, and saw the dark shadow of what seemed to be a cave on the mountain wall to his left. Without thinking he jumped into the cave. 'Rip!' a piece of his pants was torn and his thigh was cut by Zhu Changling's claw. Zhang Wuji staggered along toward the inside of the cave. Suddenly 'bang!' his forehead bumped onto a mountain rock so hard that he saw stars dancing in front of his eyes. He knew that if Zhu Changling could tear his face to pieces right now he would use any savage method to torture him. Therefore, in his fear, he desperately struggled to enter further into the cave. He did not have the

luxury of considering that if he entered this dark hole, might be trapped inside and it would be more difficult for him to escape the enemy's poisonous hands. Fortunately, the deeper he went, the narrower the cave got. Crawling for more than ten 'zhang' later, he could barely push his way forward. Zhu Changling could no longer follow him. Zhang Wuji crawled several more 'zhang' forward and then he suddenly saw light ahead; he was delighted, he moved his hands and feet faster toward the light.

Zhu Changling was anxious and angry at the same time. "I won't hurt you," he called out, "Quickly come out!" But how could Zhang Wuji heed his call?

Zhu Changling exerted his internal energy into his palm and struck the rock wall. The mountain rock was incomparably solid, when the palm hit the rock, his hand was shaken and he felt severe pain in the center of his palm, while the rock wall was not damaged in any way whatsoever. He took his short saber out with the intention of digging the rock loose so that the passageway would be somewhat wider, but he only dug a few times when 'snap', his blue-steel short saber was broken into two.

Zhu Changling was furious. He sent his strength to his shoulder and squeezed his body through the opening. Sure enough, he advanced about a foot forward, but to move any further was totally out of question. The solid rock walls were crushing his chest and back, and to his shock, he could not breathe. If he did not want to die of suffocation, he had no choice but to withdraw. Unexpectedly, his body was stuck in between the solid rocks; he could neither move forward nor withdraw backward. He was so frightened that he felt his soul was leaving him. With his entire strength his arms pushed on the rock and his body was pushed about a foot back, but there was a burst of acute pain on his chest as one

of his ribs broke.

End of Chapter 15.

Chapter 16 - If All Failed, Consult the Nine Yang

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



He saw a large skin ulcer on the big white ape's belly, with a faint trace of pus and blood. The ulcer was no more than an inch in diameter, but the hard area around it was more than ten times larger. When he looked closer, he saw a more or less a rectangular bump on the abdomen. All four sides of the bump were sewn, apparently it was a human handiwork.

Zhang Wuji continued crawling through the passageway for several more 'zhang'. The light was growing brighter, until suddenly he was dazzled by the bright sunlight. He had to close his eyes to calm down for a while before opening his eyes again. To his surprise, in front of him was a jade-green valley with clusters of bright flower bushes; the flowers were red, the trees green, complementing each other to deliver this dazzling scenery. He shouted in glee and crawled out of the cave.

The mouth of the cave was actually about a 'zhang' above the ground [reminder: 1 zhang is approximately 10ft or 3m]. He lightly jumped down and landed on a layer of soft fine grass. His nose smelled the clear and quiet fragrance of flowers; his ears heard the chirping birds from the mountain pass, and he saw fresh fruits hanging from tree branches. Who would have thought that beyond the dark cave lay such a paradise like this?

Forgetting all his wounds and pain, he let his feet loose and ran forward. After about two 'li' [1 li is approximately 0.5km], another peak blocked the way. Looking at all directions, he noticed that this jade-green valley was surrounded by tall peaks; apparently there have never been any human in this place. The tip of the peaks on the four sides all were hidden behind the cloud, the cliff was very steep, it seemed like nobody would be able to climb it.

Zhang Wuji was delighted. He saw seven, eight mountain goats were grazing on the meadow, and the goats were not scared of him. On the trees there were dozens of monkeys playing around by leaping from branch to branch, apparently because tigers, leopards or other predators were heavier, they were not able to climb over the perilous peaks. He thought, "Laotianye [the Heaven] indeed treats me not so bad, he prepares for me this kind of fairyland as my burial

place.”

Strolling back to the mouth of the cave, he heard Zhu Changling shouting from the other end, “Xiao Xiongdi, come out! Aren’t you afraid of dying of suffocation in this cave?”

“It’s so fun in here!” Zhang Wuji replied with a laugh. He picked a fruit from a dwarf tree whose name he did not know. He held it in his hand and smelled its sweet fragrance. Taking a bite, he found out that the fruit was delicious beyond comparison. Peach would not be this crisp, apple would not be this fragrant, while pear would not be this creamy. He took one of the fruits and tossed it to the cave, while calling out, “Take this! Something delicious is coming your way!”

As the fruit went through the cave, it bumped several times on the rock wall so that by the time it reached Zhu Changling, it was already smashed and mushy. But when he took a bite and chewed it, his appetite was roused that he was hungrier than ever. “Xiao Xiongdi,” he called out, “Give me some more.”

“You are a man of wicked conscience,” Zhang Wuji called back, “You deserve to die of starvation. If you want more, then come and get it yourself.”

“My body is too big,” Zhu Changling replied, “I can’t go through the cave.”

Zhang Wuji laughed, “If you cut yourself in halves, won’t you be able to come here?” he said.

Zhu Changling realized his plot had failed and been exposed; Zhang Wuji wanted him to die of starvation to avenge his hatred. In the meantime, the pain on his chest

was worsening; he opened his mouth to shout curses, “Thief little rascal, can the fruits in this cave feed you for the rest of your life? I will die of starvation outside, but no more than three days you will also die of starvation.” Zhang Wuji ignored him, he took seven, eight more fruits and had his fill.

About half a day later, a sudden wisp of thick smoke puffed out of the mouth of the cave. Zhang Wuji was startled, but then he realized that Zhu Changling must have ignited pine branches outside the cave, supposing that he would force Zhang Wuji to come out by smoking him. He did not know that there was another world at the other end of the cave, so that it would be useless even if he burned a thousand or ten thousand piculs [1 picul = 100 catties, approximately 50 kg] of pine wood. But just for the fun of it, he pretended to cough loudly.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” Zhu Changling called out, “Come out! I promise not to harm you in any way.”

“Aahhhhh ...” Zhang Wuji cried out as if he was fainting, and then he left the cave.

Walking to the west for about two ‘li’, he saw a large waterfall falling heavily down from a cliff, which he thought must be from the melted snow. Under the sunlight the falling water looked like a giant jade dragon in all its magnificence. The water flowed into a clear dark-green pool, but the pool did not overflow, so there must be another way through which the water drained from the pool.

After enjoying the scenery for half a day, he looked down and saw his hands and feet were filthy with moss and mud, plus countless cuts and bruises from the thorns and coarse grass; thereupon he went to the edge of the pool, took out

his shoes and socks, and washed his feet in the pool water.

After washing for a while, suddenly 'splash!' a big white fish jumped from the water, it was about a foot long. Zhang Wuji quickly reached out to grab. He was able to touch the fish, but it slipped and fell back into the water. Zhang Wuji leaned over the pool edge to look down into the water. He saw about a dozen big white fish swimming back and forth in the dark green water. Catching fish was a skill he had learned since his childhood on the Bing Huo Island, thereupon he broke two stiff branches and sharpened one end. He then waited patiently by the edge of the pool. As soon as another fish jumped out of the water, he thrust the spear with all his strength and it pierced the fish body. He cheered, and then with the sharpened branch he cut the fish and cleaned its intestines. Gathering some dried wood, he took out his fire blade, flint and fire cloth to build a fire and roast the fish. Shortly the aroma floated everywhere. As soon as the fish was cooked, he enjoyed the smooth and tender, delicious roast fish. He could not remember ever eating this kind of tasty fish before. In just a short moment the big fish was cleaned to its bone.

The next day he caught another big white fish and roasted it. He thought, "Since I am not going to die soon, I'd better leave the fire on, otherwise the fire cloth will be used up quickly and then it will be troublesome." Thereupon he gathered the ashes and put the partly burned firewood inside to keep it burning. All household appliances on the Bing Huo Island were homemade, so living alone in the wilderness like this was not foreign to him. He made a pot from clay, and spread some straw as his bed.

Busily working until the evening, he remembered that Zhu Changling must be very hungry, thereupon he picked a big fresh fruit and tossed it through the cave. He was afraid if he

gave Zhu Changling some fish, his strength might increase and perhaps he would be able to break through the hole and give him trouble; therefore, he never gave him any roasted fish.

By the fourth day, Zhang Wuji was busy building a clay furnace when he heard some miserable cry of a monkey. It sounded so urgent that he rushed toward the noise. He saw that a little monkey was lying on the ground next to a cliff. One of the monkey's feet was crushed under a rock that it could not move. It seemed like the monkey lost its footing and fell from the steep cliff.

He lifted the rock and pulled the monkey up, but the monkey's right leg was broken. It cried out in pain. Zhang Wuji picked two straight branches as splint to connect the monkey's broken bone. Next he looked for some herbal medicine, which he chewed mushy and applied it to the wound. Although it was difficult to seek effective herbal medicine in this valley and the medicine he applied did not have any miraculous effect, the broken bones were healing well because of his bone-mending skill.

Unexpectedly, the little monkey was grateful and wanted to repay the kindness. The second day the monkey returned, bringing lots of fresh fruits for him. Ten days later, the broken leg was completely healed. Since Zhang Wuji did not have anything to do, he spent his days playing with the monkey. If not for the cold poison occasionally flaring up, his life in that secluded valley could be called carefree and happy. Sometimes he saw wild goats grazing by. He had a thought of catching one and roasting it over the fire, but seeing the goats were so tame, he did not have the heart to kill them. Fortunately he had enough fruits on the trees and fish in the pool, so he never lacked food.

A few days later, he succeeded in catching several snow birds, which enhanced his appetite greatly. In this way he already passed more than one month. One early morning, while he had not completely awakened, he suddenly felt a large hairy hand gently stroking him on the face. He was greatly startled and jumped up, only to see a large white ape squatting by his side, holding the little monkey, with which he used to play every day, in its arm. The little monkey was squeaking and chattering incessantly with its finger pointed toward the big ape's belly.

Zhang Wuji smelled a whiff of nasty odor, like rotten meat; he saw a faint trace of pus and blood on the white ape's belly, which looked like a large skin ulcer. He smiled and said, "Alright, alright! Turned out you are bringing a sick person to see the great doctor!"

The large white ape extended its left hand, with a 'pan tao' [from the dictionary: the peaches of immortality kept by Xi Wangmu] about the size of a fist, which it respectfully presented to Zhang Wuji. Seeing this bright red and plump 'pan tao', Zhang Wuji mused, "Mama told me a legend about the immortal goddess Wangmu of Kunlun Mountain, who held a 'pan tao' feast every year on her birthday, inviting other immortals. Xi Wangmu might not exist; but the fact that Kunlun Mountain indeed produces large 'pan tao' is certainly undeniable." With a laugh he said, "I normally do not take payment; even without 'xian tao' [immortal peach], I will still treat your sore."

He reached out to gently feel the white ape's belly and could not help but feel shocked. The white ape's malignant ulcer was no more than an inch in diameter, but the hard area around it was more than ten times larger. He had never read about this kind of malignant boil in the medical manual. Supposing this hard area was full with pus and was rotten,

then this boil might be incurable. He pressed his finger on the white ape's wrist to feel its pulse, but did not find anything to cause him any concern. Next he opened up the long hair covering the ape's abdomen to look at the ulcer again. He was more shocked, because there was more or less a rectangular bump on the abdomen. All four sides of the bump were sewn. Apparently it was a human handiwork, because no matter how intelligent apes and monkeys are, they had never learned how to use needle and thread.

Looking at the boil more carefully, he deduced that the bump was the culprit, it pressed on a blood vessel and stopped the blood from flowing that the flesh around it was gangrenous and became a long lasting boil. If he wished to treat the ulcer, he must remove whatever object sewn inside the ape's abdomen. Speaking about performing operation to treat injury, he had mastered the skill taught by Hu Qingniu, and thus it should be an easy and simple procedure. However, he did not have any knife or scissors with him, also no medication whatsoever. This might pose some problems.

After contemplating for a while, he picked a rock and threw it with all his might against another rock that it smashed into pieces. He chose one piece with a sharp edge and corner, with which he slowly cut the thread sewn on the white ape's belly. The white ape was very old and was intelligent, it knew Zhang Wuji was trying to treat its injury; therefore, although it felt severe pain on its abdomen, with a strong willpower it endured the pain and did not make even a single move.

After cutting the right and upper side of the stitches, Zhang Wuji made a slanting cut to the skin on the corner, which was healed a long time ago; he saw an oilcloth package hidden in the ape's belly. He felt even more strange; but he did not have time to open the package. He set it aside and

busily sewed the abdomen skin back. Since he had no needle and thread, he used the fishbone as the needle, piercing the skin one hole at a time, and then used tree bark as the thread, tying the small holes together. With great difficulty he finished mending the cut, and then he applied some herbal medicine on the wound. He was busy for more than half a day before everything was in order. Although the white ape was strong, by this time it lay on the ground, motionless.

Zhang Wuji washed of the bloodstain from his hands and the oilcloth, then he opened the package. Inside were four thin books of scriptures. Because the oil cloth was watertight, although the books were hidden inside the ape's abdomen for a long time, the pages were still intact without any sign of damage.

The pages were filled with curvy and squiggly characters, which Zhang Wuji did not recognize. Browsing up all four books, he found that these strange characters were used in all the books, but in between the lines he saw tiny Chinese characters, as small as a fly's head. After calming himself down, he started from the first line, and found that the content of the book was actually some secret instructions on cultivating and applying 'chi' and energy. He slowly read from top to bottom; suddenly his heart skipped a beat, for he read three lines with which he was very familiar. It was the 'Wudang Jiu Yang Gong' [Wudang's Nine Yang Energy] he learned from Tai Shifu [grand master, referring to Zhang Sanfeng] and his Yu Erbo [second (older) uncle Yu, referring to Yu Lianzhou], only the subsequent part was different.

Casually browsing through, after several pages he read another sentence of the 'Wudang Jiu Yang Gong', but all in all the theory differed greatly from the one taught by Tai Shifu and Yu Erbo. His heart was beating wild as he closed

the book and pondered deeply, “What manual is this? Why does it contain sentences of the ‘Wudang Jiu Yang Gong’? But why is it different from the one taught at our Wudang school? Furthermore, it seems like this manual is ten times more complete than ours?”

Thinking to this point, he remembered the story told by Tai Shifu when he was taking him to Shaolin Temple: Tai Shifu’s master was called Reverend Jueyuan, he mastered the ‘Jiu Yang Zhen Jing’ [nine ‘yang’ (positive, sun, male, etc.) real/true scripture, in this series it is commonly translated as ‘Nine Yang Manual’], which he recited from memory just before he passed away. Tai Shifu, Heroine Guo Xiang, and Reverend Wuse of Shaolin Pai, three people, each remember parts of it. As a result, Wudang, Emei and Shaolin, three Sects, enjoyed tremendous advancement in martial arts, and were regarded as equals in the past dozens of years, their names shook the Wulin world.

“Could it be that this is the stolen Nine Yang Manual?” he mused, “That’s right, Tai Shifu said that the Nine Yang Manual was written inside the ‘Lengjia Jing’ [Lankavatara Sutra]. These squiggly and curvy characters must be the Lankavatara Sutra in Sankrit. But why is it inside the ape’s belly?”

This four-volume book was indeed the Nine Yang Manual; as for why it was hidden inside the ape’s abdomen, no one in this generation knew. More than ninety years ago, Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi stole the manual from the Shaolin Temple library, for which crime they were pursued by Reverend Jueyuan to the summit of Huashan [Mount Hua in Shaanxi] without any chance of escaping. It so happened that they had this dark grey ape with them, so they had an idea: they cut open the dark grey ape’s belly, and hid the manual inside. Later on, Jueyuan, Zhang Sanfeng, Yang Guo,

and the others searched Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi's bodies thoroughly, but failed to find the manual, so that they let the two, along the dark grey ape, go down the mountain. [Author's note: please read 'Divine Eagle Gallant Knights'] And thus the Nine Yang Manual's whereabouts became the great mystery of the Wulin World for approximately a hundred years.

Later, Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi took their dark grey ape and went to the far away Western Region. The two of them were suspicious of each other; each of them feared that when the other one had mastered the martial art of the Manual, he would kill him. Thereupon they kept their eyes on each other and neither dared to take the manual out from the ape's belly. Finally they arrived at the Jing Shen Peak of Kunlun Mountains; Yin and Xiao two people were plotting against each other. They fought until both of them sustained injuries. Thereafter this supreme manual of internal energy cultivation stayed hidden inside the dark grey ape's abdomen.

Actually, Xiao Xiangzi's martial art skill was slightly better than Yin Kexi's, but because he was hit by Reverend Jueyuan's fist on Mount Hua, his internal strength was shaken and he suffered serious injury; hence when he fought Yin Kexi later, he was killed instead of scoring a victory.

At the point of his death, Yin Kexi met 'Kunlun San Sheng' [Three Sages of Kunlun], He Zudao. Pricked by his own conscience, Yin Kexi asked He Zudao to go to Shaolin Temple and tell Reverend Jueyuan that the books were inside this ape's belly. However, by that time he was already delirious that his speech was incoherent; he said 'jing zai hou zhong' [scriptures inside the monkey], He Zudao heard it as 'jing zai you zhong' [scriptures inside the oil]. He Zudao did keep his

promise; he went to the distant Central Plains and conveyed the message 'jing zai you zhong' to Reverend Jueyuan. Jueyuan failed to comprehend the meaning of the message. Rather than talking about it, he stirred up a big disturbance instead. As a result, the Wulin world enjoyed the addition of Wudang and Emei, two Sects.

As for the dark grey ape, it was fortunate to have Kunlun Mountain's immortal peach as its diet; with the spiritual influence of the heavens and the earth, after more than ninety years it was still capable of jumping around as if flying. The dark grey and shiny long hair covering its entire body gradually turned snow-white that it turned into a white ape. It was just that the manual hidden inside its belly had caused a digestive system problem that from time to time it suffered stomach ache. Finally the malignant skin ulcer was developed on its belly, which lasted until today, when Zhang Wuji took the books out. Speaking of this white ape, it had entrusted its great misfortune to a trusted friend. This whole story was so complicated that even if there were someone with intelligence a hundred times better than Zhang Wuji in the world, he would definitely not able to deduce it.

Zhang Wuji was lost in thought for half a day. Realizing he would not be able to solve this riddle, he did not take the trouble to think about it further. He took the big 'pan tao' presented by the white ape and took a bite, enjoying the fresh sweetness of the juice slowly flowing into his throat. It was indisputably better than the nameless fruits he found in the valley.

Finished eating the 'pan tao', Zhang Wuji thought, "Tai Shifu once said that if I can practice the 'Jiu Yang Shen Gong' [nine 'yang' divine strength/power] of Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, three Sects, then I can drive the cold poison away

from my body. These three Sects' Jiu Yang Gong all came from the Nine Yang Manual. If this book is indeed the Nine Yang Manual and I practice according to it, then the end result will far exceed the result if I practice the three Sects' divine power separately. Since I have nothing to do in this valley, I'd better practice according to this book. Supposing my guess is wrong; that this book is actually useless, so much so that it is harmful to me, the worst that can happen to me is death anyway."

Without anything to weigh his heart down, he put the other three volumes of the manual on a dry place. He spread some straw over the books, and put three big rocks on top, for fear that the monkeys, being mischievous, would fight over the books and perhaps would tear the books apart into pieces. With the first volume in his hand, he started by reading it several times to commit its contents to his memory. Afterwards he would try to understand it and only then he would start practicing the first sentence. His thought was, 'Even if I succeeded in cultivating the divine strength from the book, and managed to repel the cold poison, I would still be imprisoned in this valley with steep peaks all around, could not get out forever. My days in this valley are long, if I can succeed today, good; if I must wait 'til tomorrow, it's also good. It doesn't make any difference. If I fail, I would have something to do to pass my boring days anyway.'

Strangely, with this win-or-lose-always-happy attitude, he made a surprisingly rapid progress. In only four short months, he succeeded to comprehend in detail the skill described in the first volume of the book, which he immediately trained accordingly.

Finished training the first volume, he did a quick calculation, and found that the date predicted by Hu Qingniu on which the cold poison would take his life had already come and gone. His body felt light and healthy, the 'zhen qi' [real 'chi']

flowed freely in his entire body, without any symptom of an illness. Previously, the cold poison would flare-up often; now, the interval between occasional attacks was more than a month. When the attack came, it was very light.

Not too long afterwards, he read a sentence in the second volume: 'Exhale according to the Nine Yang, hold in the mouth first, this book is called the Jiu Yang Zhen Jing'. [Translator's note: I am not sure about this part; any help will be appreciated.] Now he was convinced that this book was really the treasured texts which had always been in Tai Shifu's mind all these years. He was delighted and trained even more diligently. In addition, the white ape was grateful for his kindness in treating its illness that he had an endless supply of large 'pan tao', which was good to invigorate his body and lift his spirit.

When he was halfway through the second volume, the cold poison inside his body had been driven out completely. Every day, other than cultivating his energy, he played with the apes and monkeys. When he picked the fruits, he would always give half to Zhu Changling. Thus he lived without worry or concerns, free and easy. However, to Zhu Changling, who was still on that little piece of platform, a day dragged past like a year. When winter came, his world was covered in ice and snow; the cold wind penetrated his bones. The hardships he suffered were beyond description.

Zhang Wuji had acquired immunity to heat and cold after finishing the second volume. It was just that the further along he was, the more complicated and subtle the lesson got; his progress was not as rapid as before. He needed a whole year to finish the third volume; the final volume took him more than three years until he achieved a satisfactory result. He had been living in that quiet, secluded snowy valley for more than five years by now; he had grown from a

boy to a tall and well-built young man.

For the last year or two, whenever he felt like it, he would occasionally play with the apes and the monkeys by climbing up the rock wall and looking out into the distance. Based on his current skill, it would not be too difficult for him to climb over the peak and get out of the valley. However, each time he remembered that the world was full with treacherous and deceitful people, he could not help but shudder. He thought: why should he go outside to bring trouble to himself, just like a fish throwing itself into the net? Wouldn't it be better to live in this beautiful valley until he grew old and die?

One afternoon he browsed the four-volume book from head to tail all the way through. When he flipped the very last page, his heart was joyful but he felt a slight emptiness at the same time. He dug a hole, about three feet deep, on the mountain wall to the left of the cave. He wrapped the four-volume Nine Yang Manual, as well as Hu Qingniu's Medical Manual and Wang Nan'gu's Poison Manual, inside the oil cloth he took out from the white ape's belly, and buried the bundle in the hole. He then filled the hole with dirt, thinking, "I got the Manual from the white ape's belly; that was truly destiny, an enormous opportunity. I wonder if in a hundred or a thousand years it would be somebody else's destiny to come hither and find these three Manuals?" Picking up a sharp stone, he carved six large characters on the mountain wall, 'Zhang Wuji's Manuals Burial Place'.

When he was in training, he had something occupying his mind every day, so that he did not feel the slightest degree of loneliness. That day, after successfully completing his training, he felt hollowness in his heart. Moreover, with the newly acquired 'shen gong' [divine strength], his courage soared high. He mused, "If this time Zhu Bobo came to

harass me again, I would not be afraid of him. There is no harm in going out and talk to him.” Thereupon he bent down to crawl into the cave again.

When he entered the valley, he was a small fifteen-year old boy; going out, he was a grown up twenty-year old adult, who could not go through the narrow passage of the cave. Taking a deep breath, he utilized the ‘suo gu gong’ [shrinking bones skill], making the bones in his entire body crowded together, reducing the space between bone and bone. Gently and easily he slipped through the cave.

Zhu Changling was sleeping soundly, leaning against the rock wall, dreaming he was sitting in one of his family’s banquets, with maids and servants running around him, and friends and relatives fawn up to him; it was a happy and ego-boosting occasion for him. Suddenly someone tapped his shoulder; he woke up with a start, and saw the shadow of a big and tall man in front of him.

Zhu Changling leaped up, he was still half asleep. “You ... you ...” he called out.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “Zhu Bobo, it’s me, Zhang Wuji.”

Zhu Changling was startled and delighted, but angry and hateful as well. He stared at Zhang Wuji for a long time before saying, “You grew this tall. Hmm, why didn’t you come out to talk to me? No matter how I asked you, you have never paid me any attention.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “I was afraid you would hurt me.”

Zhu Changling’s right hand suddenly reached out, using the

'qin na' [grab and capture, grappling] technique he grabbed Zhang Wuji's shoulder, while sternly said, "So you are not afraid now?" But he felt the palm of his hand boiling hot; he could not stop his arm from shaking and his hand slipped, while there was a dull pain at the pit of his stomach. In his shock he took three steps backwards and stared at Zhang Wuji with a blank expression on his face.

"You ... you ..." he asked, "What martial art is this?"

After completing the Nine Yang Manual training, it was the first time that Zhang Wuji had ever tried it out; he was pleasantly surprised at its formidable power. Zhu Changling was a first rate martial art master, yet he was still shaken by his 'shen gong' without he him needing to lift even one finger. Seeing Zhu Changling's miserable condition and his amazement, Zhang Wuji was very proud of himself. "So you think this martial art skill is useful?" he said with a laugh.

Zhu Changling's mind was still shaken. "What ... what martial art skill was that?" he asked again.

"It's Jiu Yang Shen Gong," Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhu Changling was stunned. "How did you train it?" he asked. Zhang Wuji did not hide anything. He told Zhu Changling how he treated a white ape's illness, how he found the manual inside the ape's belly, and how he practiced according to manual.

Listening to this story, Zhu Changling was jealous and resentful at the same time. He thought, "I had to suffer hardship beyond description for five years, alone on this peak, yet this kid actually trained an incomparably mysterious 'shen gong'." He did not remember that it was because his own heart's desire to harm others that they ended up this way; he also did not remember that Zhang

Wuji had supplied him with fruits these past five years, every day without fail, so that he could live until today. He only remembered that this kid was too lucky while he was too unlucky, and he felt it was so unfair. Anger rose in his heart, with a forced laughter he said, "Where is that Nine Yang Manual? Can you show it to me?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "There is no harm in letting you take a look. I don't think you will remember much in just a short time." Thereupon he said, "I buried it inside the cave, I'll bring it out tomorrow for you to see."

"You have grown this big," Zhu Changling said, "How can you go through the cave?"

"The cave is actually not too narrow," Zhang Wuji said, "If you make an effort to shrink your body and push, you can come through."

"Do you think that I can squeeze through?" Zhu Changling asked.

Zhang Wuji nodded and said, "We can try together tomorrow. The place inside the cave is spacious, nothing compared to staying on this tiny platform." He was thinking of using his power to press his shoulder, chest, buttocks, and the bones all around his body, and help him to go through the cave.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhu Changling laughed, "You are indeed a good man, a gentleman who does not recall old grievances. I have done you wrong, I wish for your forgiveness." While saying that, he bowed deeply with cupped fists.

Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety, saying, "Zhu Bobo does not need to be overly courteous. We'll think of a

way to get out of this place tomorrow.”

Zhu Changling was overjoyed. “Did you say we are going to leave this place?” he asked.

Zhang Wuji said, “If apes and monkeys can come in and out, we certainly can.”

“If that’s the case, why didn’t you leave?” Zhu Changling asked.

Showing a faint smile, Zhang Wuji said, “I didn’t want to go out for fear that people would bully me, but now I am not afraid anymore. I also want to see my Tai Shifu, along with all Shibo and Shishu [martial older and younger uncles, respectively].”

Zhu Changling laughed out loud, clapped his hands and said, “Very good, very good!” He took two steps backward, suddenly his shadow swayed, ‘Aiyo!’ he shouted, and fell over the cliff to the empty air below.

That his extreme joy suddenly turned into an unforeseen accident, had taken Zhang Wuji by surprise. He hurriedly leaned over the cliff and called out, “Zhu Bobo, are you all right?” He only heard two groans uttered in a low voice from underneath.

Zhang Wuji was delighted; he thought, “Fortunately he did not fall all the way down, but I am afraid he is injured.” Judging by the sound of the groans, Zhu Changling was only several ‘zhang’ away from him. When he looked closely, he saw by coincidence a pine tree grew just beneath the cliff. Zhu Changling’s body lay horizontally on the tree trunk, unmoving. Seeing this situation, Zhang Wuji was thinking of leaping down and carrying Zhu Changling back over the cliff. With his skill right now, it should not be too difficult.

Thereupon he took a deep breath and aiming for the tree trunk, which looked like an extended arm out the canyon wall, he jumped down lightly.

When his toes were still half a foot away from the tree trunk, suddenly the tree trunk dropped. He was hanging midair and did not have any place to set his foot on; although he had mastered the 'shen gong', he was only a human and not a bird; how could he fly back up to the cliff? It was as if a lightning suddenly illuminated his dark mind as he understood: "Turns out Zhu Changling is still employing a dirty trick to harm me. He had broken the branch and held it in his hand, waiting for me to set my foot on it, he let the tree branch drop down." But his understanding had come too late; his body fell straight down ...

Zhu Changling had lived on that tiny platform with circumference of less than several dozen 'zhang' for more than five years. He knew every grass every tree, every grain of sand and every rock on that platform by heart. He pretended to be falling over the cliff and feigned injury, knowing full well that Zhang Wuji would jump down to help. As expected, his treacherous plan prevailed; Zhang Wuji fell down the tens of thousands 'zhang' deep canyon.

Zhu Changling laughed out loud, thinking, "This kid will fall into pulp today, finally I can vent my five years worth of resentment!" With the help of a long cane by the pine tree, he leaped over the cliff back to the platform. He mused, "Last time I could not go through that cave, perhaps I was impatient and exerted too much strength that my rib was broken. This kid's stature is a lot bigger and taller than mine. If he could go through, I don't see any reason why I cannot. After I find the Nine Yang Manual, I'll find a way home from the other side. Someday when I have acquired the 'shen gong', I will be unequalled under the heavens, won't it be

wonderful? Ha ha ha ha ...!” The more he thought about it, the happier he was; he went into the cave at once.

Before long, he had crawled to the place where five years ago he broke a rib. His only thought was: ‘that kid is bigger than me, if he can go through, I certainly can too’. He did not think erroneously, however, he forgot one tiny little detail: Zhang Wuji had mastered the shrinking bone technique from the Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

Calming himself down, he squeezed into the narrow passage, inch by inch forward, and sure enough, he managed to advance about a ‘zhang’ further than five years ago. But from this point forward, no matter how he exerted his strength, it was simply impossible to advance even half an inch more. He realized that if he used brute force, he would only repeat the disaster he suffered five years ago; he would certainly break some more rib bones. Thereupon he calmed himself down and exhaled all air from his lungs. Sure enough, his body shrunk two more inches that he managed to squeeze three more feet forward. However, without any air in his lungs, soon he was suffocating; his heart beat felt like the beating of a drum, several times he felt he was going to faint. Knowing his condition was far from good, he had no choice but retreat before he could make another plan. He did not think, however, that when he moved forward, his feet propelled his body by kicking against the uneven surface of the mountain wall, but to go back, there was nothing he could use as a stepping stone. As he moved forward, his arms were in front of his head to reduce size of his shoulder. At this moment, his hands were tied by the rocks all around his head; he could not stretch the arms further, he could not use the least bit of strength in his hands.

He started to panic; thinking, “That kid is bigger than me;

he could go through, I can certainly go through, why am I stuck in here? This really does not make any sense!" But there are so many things in this world that do not make sense. This man, who possessed excellent literary and martial art skills, whose intelligence and resourcefulness could be considered first rank among the masters, hereafter stuck inside the narrow passageway of a remote mountain cave; unable to neither advance nor retreat.

Fallen under Zhu Changling's treacherous plan, Zhang Wuji fell straight down from the cliff, while continuously scolding himself, "Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, you are such a useless kid. You knew Zhu Changling's matchless craftiness, yet you still fell under his evil trick. You deserve to die, deserve to die!"

Although he scolded himself as deserving death, he was actually struggling furiously to stay alive. The 'chi' inside his body flowed, sending his strength upward, trying to slow down his fall, so that his body would not be smashed to powder and his bones broken to pieces. But he was in midair, swaying against emptiness, his body was beyond his control. Even when he exerted his whole power until not an ounce of strength left, he still felt the wind passing his ears had not diminished at all.

A short moment later, he felt the sting of the bright light reflected from the white snow below in his eyes. He knew he was at the critical moment between life and death, but he saw about a 'zhang' away there was a big pile of snow. He did not have time to distinguish whether that pile was really snow or a white rock; immediately he made three somersaults in the air, trying to land on that pile of snow. His body curved diagonally, his left foot pointed toward that pile of snow. 'Splosh!' his body sank into the pile of snow.

His more than five years training of Jiu Yang Shen Gong showed its formidable power; as he made contact with the pile of snow, his body reacted naturally and he bounced upwards. But the momentum from the ten thousand 'zhang' fall was simply too great. He felt a severe pain on his legs as the bones were broken.

Although his injury was severe, his mind was still clear; he saw firewood flying in the air, because the pile of snow was actually a farmer's pile of firewood and straw. "What a close call!" he groaned inwardly, "If under the snow was not a pile of firewood but a block of boulder, I, Zhang Wuji, would have lost my life." Sending his strength to his arms, he slowly crawled out of the pile of firewood, and rolled toward the snowy ground. Inspecting his own legs' injury, he took a deep breath and set his broken bones, while thinking, "I must lie down without moving for at least one month before I can walk again. That shouldn't be any problem because I can use my hands in place of my feet; but I cannot stay here and die of starvation." He thought further, "This pile of firewood must belong to a farmer family; there must be some people nearby."

He was about to call for help when suddenly he had a second thought, "There are too many evil people in this world. It's all right for me to lie alone on this snowy ground, recovering from my injury; but if I call and an evil person comes, I will be in big trouble." Thereupon he quietly lied down on the snowy ground, waiting for his broken bones to heal slowly.

And so he lied down like that for three days. His stomach rumbled from hunger, but he knew that especially at the beginning of the healing process, he must not move at all; he would be crippled for the rest of his life if the healing bones were not set straight. Consequently, he steeled

himself not to make the slightest move. Whenever he felt unbearable hunger, he would grab a handful of snow just to appease his hunger. In these three days he kept thinking, "From now on, I will have to be extra careful in every step I take. I must not fall under evil people's tricks. Otherwise I may not be as lucky as today and in the end may not avoid great calamity."

Toward the evening of the fourth day, he was lying down quietly while cultivating his internal energy. He felt his mind was clear and his body relaxed. Although the injury on his legs was heavy, it did not appear to hinder his training that he made some progress. Suddenly the quietness of the night was broken by the noise of barking dogs in the distant, which gradually came closer. Apparently, this pack of vicious dogs was pursuing some kind of wild animal. Zhang Wuji was startled. "Could the dogs be Zhu Jiuzhen Jijie's? Hmm, those vicious dogs have been killed by Zhu Bobo. But it's been a few years; she could have raised another pack of dogs."

Focusing his eyes, he looked toward the distant snowy ground, and saw that a man was running fast, pursued by three large howling dogs. The man was obviously dead-tired; he staggered along for several steps and then tumbled down to the ground, but because he was afraid of the sharp teeth and claws of the dogs, he struggled hard to stand up and desperately ran.

Zhang Wuji remembered his own sufferings he received from dogs attack a few years ago; he could not refrain the blood in his chest from boiling. He had the desire to render his help, unfortunately his legs were broken and he could not walk.

Suddenly he heard the miserable cry of that man as he fell

down and two vicious dogs climbed over his body and bit fiercely. "Vicious dogs, over here!" Zhang Wuji indignantly shouted.

When the dogs heard the call, they charged toward Zhang Wuji. Smelling that Zhang Wuji was not someone they knew, the dogs surrounded him while barking madly, before they finally pounced on him to bite him. Zhang Wuji stretched out his finger and flicked each dog on its nose. The three vicious dogs rolled down and died at once. Seeing that with only a gentle flick of his finger he killed the three dogs, Zhang Wuji could not help feeling startled by the formidable power of his Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

He heard that the sound of that man's groan was very weak. "Dage [big brother]," he asked, "Did the dogs bite you really bad?"

"I ... I ... can't hold on ... I ... I ..." that man said.

Zhang Wuji said, "My legs are broken, I can't walk. Can you come over here? Let me take a look at your wounds."

"Yes ... yes ..." the man replied. Huffing and puffing he struggled to crawl over. After crawling for a while, he stopped a moment, then crawled again toward Zhang Wuji, but when he was about a 'zhang' away from him, he suddenly cried out, 'Ah!' and then fell flat on the ground, he could not move any more. The two of them were quite some distance away from each other; one could not go over, the other could not come closer.

"Dage," Zhang Wuji asked, "Where exactly is your wound?"

The man replied, "I ... chest, belly ... the vicious dogs tore my stomach and pulled out my intestines."

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He knew that since that man's intestines had already out, he would not live. "Why did those vicious dogs chase you?" he asked.

The man replied, "I ... went out tonight to chase the wild boars away, so ... so they will not damage my crop. I saw Zhu Jia Da Xiaojie [eldest miss of Zhu family] and ... and a young master talking underneath a tree. I should have not come close ... I ... aiyo!" With a loud cry he died.

Although he did not finish, Zhang Wuji understood most of what he was about to say. It seemed like Zhu Jiuzhen and Wei Bi were having a rendezvous in the middle of the night, and met this peasant by accident, so Zhu Jiuzhen released her dogs to kill him. Zhang Wuji's anger arose, but suddenly he heard the sound of hoof beats, followed by several whistles. Apparently Zhu Jiuzhen was calling her dogs.

The hoof beats came closer, two riders coming over, fast. The riders were one man and one woman. The woman suddenly called out, "Ah! How come General Ping Xi and the others are all dead?" The voice belonged to none other than Zhu Jiuzhen. She still called her vicious dogs as generals, no different than before.

The man riding with her was indeed Wei Bi. He dismounted and said in astonishment, "Two people are dead in here!"

Zhang Wuji quietly decided on his course of action, "If they come to harm me, I have no choice but to act without leniency."

Zhu Jiuzhen looked at the peasant's corpse with the intestines spilled out; it was a terrifying sight. Zhang Wuji's clothes were tattered to the extreme, his hair was

disheveled, his face was covered with unkempt moustache and beard, he was lying down on the ground motionless, so she thought he must be dead, bitten by the dogs early on. She was eager to talk about feelings and love with Wei Bi, and thus she did not want to stay much longer.

“Biaoge, let’s go!” she said, “These two must be fighting with all they had and killed my three generals before their own deaths.” Pulling her reins, she galloped to the west.

Wei Bi felt there was something unusual in the death of these three dogs, but seeing Zhu Jiuzhen riding away, he felt it was inappropriate for him to stay and investigate carefully. Thereupon he mounted his horse and galloped away behind her.

Zhang Wuji could still hear Zhu Jiuzhen’s tender laughter coming from afar, he felt anger rise in his heart. Just a little over five years ago he adored her as a goddess. She only needed to lift her little finger, even if she wanted him to climb the mountain of blades or go down the boiling oil, he would do so without the least bit of hesitation. But seeing her again tonight, for some unknown reason, her charms on him had unexpectedly completely vanished.

Zhang Wuji thought that it was because of his mastery of the Nine Yin Manual, or perhaps because he had discovered her treacherous scheme toward him. He did not realize that most young men would experience this kind of blind infatuation stage of the first love, in which he would neglect sleep and food for the sake of a young girl that he would live and die for that particular girl. However, this kind of passionate infatuation comes quickly, also vanishes as quickly, someday his mind would clear up and he would laugh at his own former days' wallowing.

In the meantime, his stomach was growling with hunger. He was thinking of tearing off a dog leg and eating it, but he was afraid that Zhu Jiuzhen and Wei Bi would return and find out that he had not died yet, and he had eaten her general. In which case he would have committed a grave offense against her; he was not Wei Bi's match while his legs were broken.

Early in the morning the next day, he saw a bald eagle eyeing the dead people and dead dogs on the ground. The eagle wheeled several times in the air before finally diving down to feed. This eagle really deserved to die, because instead of going down on the dead man or the dead dogs, it flew straight toward Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji reached up and caught the eagle's neck. With a light pinch he killed the bird.

"It is truly a heaven-sent breakfast," he muttered happily. He plucked the feather, tore the eagle's leg, and took a big bite. Although it was raw, he ate it with gusto because he had been hungry for three days.

Before he finished the first eagle, the second eagle came down. And thus Zhang Wuji appeased his hunger with eagle meat, while lying down on the snowy ground waiting patiently for his broken bones to heal completely.

A few more days passed. Surprisingly, he did not see any humans wandering around in the wilderness. There were three dead dogs and one dead man by his side; fortunately it was the depth of the winter, the weather was bitter cold, so that the corpses did not decay. He was accustomed to spending his days alone, so he did not suffer from loneliness.

One afternoon, after circulating his internal energy for one round, he saw two bald eagles flying high in the sky. The

eagles circled around for a long time without daring to fly down. One eagle suddenly swooped down, fast, but when it was about three feet away from Zhang Wuji, it suddenly turned around and soared high to the sky. The movement was extremely swift and amazing. All of a sudden Zhang Wuji had an inspiration, "This movement can be used in martial art; attack when the enemy expects it the least, and when the attack fails, swiftly retreat far away."

In the past, although Jueyuan Dashi's entire body was filled with the divine energy, when he received attack from Xiao Xiangzi and He Zudao, his hands and feet moved randomly without any ability to resist. Zhang Sanfeng had to ask Yang Guo to teach him four stances first before he was able to fight Yin Kexi.

Zhang Wuji had learned martial arts ever since his childhood, so he had a far superior foundation compared to Jueyuan and Zhang Sanfeng. However, Xie Xun only taught him the theory of martial art, without the actual practical stance or style. Right now Zhang Wuji understood the painstaking effort of his foster father. Yifu's mastery of martial art was broad and profound; supposing he imparted his knowledge by step by step instructions, perhaps even twenty years would not be enough to teach Zhang Wuji everything he knew. Knowing that their time together was limited, he insisted that Zhang Wuji firmly remember all the key theories of the martial arts, so that he could comprehend it on his own later on.

The only martial art ZhangWuji really learned was the thirty-two stance Wudang Long Fist, which his father taught him on the wooden raft. He realized that from now on, other than continue cultivating the Jiu Yang Shen Gong until he reached perfection, he should try to integrate his excellent internal energy with the martial art theory Xie Xun passed

on to him. Thereupon every time he saw a flower blown by the wind or fell down to the earth, strange tree shape reaching out to the sky, as well as the movements of birds and beasts, the changing of the wind and cloud, he would often think about martial art movements.

This moment, he was hoping that the bald eagles would circle back and display their various movements. While he was deep in thought, suddenly he heard footsteps on the snowy ground from a distance. The steps were light and intermittent; the newcomer appeared to be a woman. Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw a woman carrying a bamboo basket, approaching him in quick steps.

When she saw bodies of people and dogs lying around on the snow, she exclaimed, "Ah!" and halted her steps in fright. Zhang Wuji focused his eyes and saw that she was a young girl, about seventeen, eighteen years of age. Her dress was simple; apparently she was a poor peasant girl. Her countenance was rather dark, she seemed to suffer some kind of skin disease, with bumps and indentations all over her face. In short, she was very ugly; only her eyes were bright, her posture was also slender and elegant.

She took a step closer and was slightly startled to see that Zhang Wuji was staring at her. "You ... you are not dead yet?" she asked.

"Maybe not," Zhang Wuji replied. Both the question and the answer did not make any sense; once both of them realized what they were saying, they could not help but laugh.

"Since you are not dead, why are you lying down here without moving?" she asked with a laugh, "You frightened me."

"I fell from the mountain and broke my legs," Zhang Wuji

replied, "I have no choice but to lie down in here."

"Was that man your companion?" the girl asked, "Why are there three dead dogs over here?"

"These three dogs were very vicious," Zhang Wuji said, "They bit this Dage to his death, but they also turned into dead dogs."

The girl said, "What can you do, lying in here? Are you hungry?"

"Naturally I am starving," Zhang Wuji said, "But I cannot move. I have to submit to the will of Heaven."

The girl smiled slightly. She took two wheat cakes from her basket and handed the cakes over to him.

"Thank you very much, Miss," Zhang Wuji said, but as he received the cakes, he did not immediately eat it.

"Are you afraid my cakes are poisonous?" the girl asked, "Why don't you eat it?"

In the last five years, other than occasional exchange through the cave with Zhu Changling, Zhang Wuji had never tasted anything else; furthermore, he had never spoken even half a word with another human being. This time he met this girl, although her appearance was ugly, her manner of speaking was actually quite charming; his heart was delighted. He said, "Because Miss gave me these cakes, I can't bear to eat it."

His words carried a somewhat teasing tone. He was always honest and frank; he had never smooth talked anybody, but in front of this girl, he felt comfortable and almost without

thinking had blurted those words.

When she heard it, the girl's countenance darkened. "Humph," she snorted.

Zhang Wuji immediately regretted his words; busily he took a big bite of the cake. But because he was in a hurry, the cake choked his throat, and he coughed it out.

The girl's anger turned into delight, "Thanks the Heaven and thanks the Earth," she said, "May you be choked to death! This ugly freak is not a good person, no wonder Laotianye [God, lit. old master of the sky] punished you. How come nobody else broke his dog-legs, and only you fell down and broke your bones?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "For five years I never cut my hair or shave my face, of course I look like an ugly freak. But you are not necessarily more beautiful than I am. We are the same ['ban jin ba liang' - half a pound eight ounces]. The eldest brother does not speak ill about the second brother." But of course he kept this thought to himself. With all seriousness he said, "I have been lying down in here for nine days. To see Miss passing through is such a blessing indeed. Now that Miss gave me these cakes, I thank you very much."

The girl pursed her lips, laughed and said, "I asked you: How come nobody else broke his dog-legs and only you fell down and broke your bones? If you do not answer, I am going to take the cakes back."

Listening to her peal of laughter and seeing the twinkle in her eyes, showing her mischievousness, Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken. "How come her eyes look very much like Mama?" he mused, "When Mama swindled the old monk of Shaolin Temple just before she died, her eyes also shone like

this." Thinking to this point, he could not stop tears from welling up in his eyes, and very soon the tears flowed down this face.

"Pei," the girl spat and said, "I won't take your cakes away. You don't need to cry. I didn't know you are such a useless fool."

"It's not that I am crying over your cake," Zhang Wuji said, "It's just that I am remembering a sad memory."

That girl had turned away and walked for two steps, but as she heard him, she turned her head and said, "What sad memory? A foolish-looking fellow like you also have a sad memory?"

Zhang Wuji sighed deeply and said, "I remember my Mama, my passed away Mama."

The girl guffawed and said, "Your Mama always gave you cake, didn't she?"

"Mama always gave me cakes to eat," Zhang Wuji said, "But I remember her because your smile looks like my Mama."

The girl angrily said, "You devil! So you said I am that old? That I am as old as your mother?" While saying that, she picked a piece of firewood and hit Zhang Wuji, twice.

If Zhang Wuji wanted to seize the firewood in her hand, it would be very easy, but he thought, "She does not know my Ma was young and pretty. She only knows that I look like an ugly freak; no wonder she is angry." So after she struck him twice, he said, "When she died, my Ma was very pretty."

With a serious face she said, "You make fun of me because I

am ugly, you don't want to live. I'll pull your leg!" She bent down, acting as if she was going to pull Zhang Wuji's leg.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; his broken legs were just beginning to heal. If she did indeed pull it, then all previous accomplishment would come to nothing. Hastily he grabbed a handful of snow. As soon as that girl's hand touched his leg, he would strike the acupoint in between her eyebrows to knock her unconscious on the spot.

Luckily that girl was only scaring him; looking at the great change of his face, she said, "Look at your frightened face! Who told you to make fun of me?"

Zhang Wuji said, "If I intentionally make fun of Miss, after my both legs are healed, let me fall again and break my legs three times that in the end I become a cripple."

The girl giggled and said, "Alright, so be it!" She sat on the ground next to him and said, "So your Ma was a pretty woman. How could you compare me with her? Do you think I am pretty?"

Zhang Wuji was speechless for a moment, then he said, "I don't know why, but for some reason I feel that you are somewhat similar to my Ma. Although you are not as pretty as my Ma, but I like looking at you."

The girl bent her middle finger and gently tapped his forehead twice with her knuckle. She said with a laugh, "Good boy, then call me Mama!" But as soon as these words came out of her mouth, she immediately realized its inappropriateness; thereupon she closed her mouth and turned her head the other way, yet she still could not stifle her laughter.

Looking at her expression, Zhang Wuji vaguely remembered when his Mama chatted with his Papa on the Bing Huo Island, her expression was very much like this. All of a sudden he felt that this ugly girl was simply elegant and charming; her manner was sweet, and that she was not ugly at all. He could not help but staring at her with a dreamy look on his face.

The girl turned her head around and saw the way he looked at her; she laughed and said, "Why do you like looking at me? Tell me."

Zhang Wuji stared blankly at her for half a day. He shook his head and said, "I don't know. I only feel that when I look at you, my heart feels safe and comfortable. I feel that you will treat me with nothing but goodness. You will not bully me, harm me!"

"Ha ha ..." the girl laughed, "You are dead wrong! In all my life, I like nothing better than harming others." Suddenly she raised the firewood in her hand and struck Zhang Wuji's broken legs twice, and then jumped up and walked away.

These two strikes happened to fall right on Zhang Wuji's broken bones. He was caught off guard and cried loudly in pain, "Aiyo!" But the girl only giggled and turned her head around to make a face at him.

Zhang Wuji kept his gaze on her as she gradually disappeared in the distance. The pain on his broken legs was unbearable. He mused, "Turns out all women love to harm others. The beautiful ones love to hurt people, the ugly ones also like to inflict pain on me."

That night in his sleep he dreamed about that young girl, also about his mother. Several times the images in his mind

blurred between that girl and his mother. He was unsure if the face in his dream was beautiful or ugly, he only knew that the eyes were clear and bright, and both were mischievous and charming at the same time as those eyes were gazing at him. His dream brought him to his childhood past, when his mother often teased him by deliberately stretching out her leg to trip him. And then when he stumbled and cried in pain, mother would hug him and kiss him, while did not stop saying, "Good child, don't cry, Mama loves you dearly!"

He woke up with a start; suddenly a thought flashed in his mind, a thought which he had never suspected before, "Why did Mama like to see others suffer? Yifu's eyes were blinded by her, Yu Sanbo [third (older) uncle] was crippled by her underlings, the entire family of Lin'An prefecture's Long Men [Dragon Gate] Escort Agency was also perished under her hands. In the end, was Mama a good person, or was she an evil person?"

After gazing the continuously twinkling stars high in the sky for a long, long time, he sighed and said to himself, "Doesn't matter if she was a good or evil person, she was my mother." In his heart he thought, "If Mama was still alive, I would love her with all my heart." Again his mind wandered toward that peasant girl. He was baffled as why without any reason she hit his broken legs. "I did not offend her at all, why did she want me to cry out in pain before she was happy? Could it be that she really loves hurting others?" He wished she would come again, but he was also afraid she would hurt him with different method.

As his hand gently stroked the half eaten cake by his side, he remembered that peasant girl's expression when she said, 'So your Ma was a pretty woman. How could you compare me with her? Do you think I am pretty?' He could

not stop himself from saying out loud, "You are pretty; I really love seeing you."

Indulging himself in this kind of fancy thought, he lay down for two more days, but that peasant girl did not come. Zhang Wuji started to think that she would never come again, who would have thought that toward the afternoon of the third day, the peasant girl appeared from behind the hillside, walking toward him with the bamboo basket in her hand.

"Ugly freak," she said with a laugh, "You have not died yet?"

Zhang Wuji also laughed. "Most of me have died of starvation, a little part of me is still alive," he said.

The peasant girl giggled and sat by his side. Suddenly she extended her foot and kicked his broken leg, asking, "Is this part dead or still alive?"

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out, "Don't you have any conscience?"

"What conscience?" the girl replied, "What did you do to me that I should be good to you?"

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He said, "Three days ago you hit me really bad, but I don't hate you. In fact, I have been thinking about you often these past two days."

The girl's face reddened, she was angry, but forced herself to bear it. "Who wants to be thought by you, an ugly freak?" she said, "Most likely you did not think good things about me. In your belly, you must be cursing me as ugly and evil girl."

"You are not ugly at all," Zhang Wuji said, "But why must

you hurt others first before you can be happy?"

With a chuckle the girl said, "If others do not suffer pain, how can I be happy?" She could see the disagreement in Zhang Wuji's expression, but she also noticed the half-eaten cake in his hand, which after three days he had not finished eating. She said, "You keep that cake until now? Won't it taste awful?"

Zhang Wuji said, "This cake was given by Miss, I hate to part with it." Three days ago, he said those words half-jokingly, but today he was very sincere.

The girl knew he was not talking empty words, her face blushed slightly. "I have fresh cake," she said, while taking many more food from the basket. Other than cakes, there were a roast chicken and a roast mutton leg.

Zhang Wuji was very happy. He had been eating raw eagle meat these days; it was dripping with blood, smelly, and tough. The roast chicken was delicious; it was still hot that it burned his hand somewhat, but in his mouth it was delicious beyond measure.

The girl watched his appetite while she chuckled and sat down, hugging her knees. "Ugly freak," she said, "You are eating happily, it's fun watching you eat. Apparently you are different; I don't have to hurt you for me to be happy."

"Others are happy, you are happy. Now that is the real happiness," Zhang Wuji said.

"Humph!" the girl sneered and said, "Let me tell you first: right now I am happy, so I won't hurt you. There will come a day when I am not happy. I can't say for sure; perhaps I will torture you until you are neither dead nor alive. At that time

you must not blame me."

Zhang Wuji shook his head, "Bad people have been torturing me since I was little until I am a grown up. The more I was tortured, the stronger I became."

With a cold laugh the girl said, "Don't be so sure of yourself. We'll see."

Zhang Wuji said, "In that case, as soon as my legs are healed, I am going to go far away from you. Even if you want to torture me, hurt me, you won't be able to find me."

The girl said, "Then I am going to cut your legs first, so you won't be able to leave me for the rest of your life."

Hearing her icy-cold voice, Zhang Wuji could not help but shiver. He believed that she was capable of doing whatever she said. Those words were certainly not an empty threat.

The girl stared at him for half a day. She sighed and then her expression changed suddenly, "Do you think you deserve it? Ugly freak! Do you think you deserve me cutting your dog legs?" She leaped up, grabbed the half-eaten roast chicken from Zhang Wuji's hand, the mutton leg, and the cakes, and tossed them all far away. Lastly, she also spat on Zhang Wuji's face.

In shock Zhang Wuji looked at her. He felt that she was not actually angry with him, nor did she hold him in contempt; yet her face revealed her deep misery. Apparently she bore an unspeakable burden in her heart. He wanted to comfort her, but in that instant he was not able to find any appropriate words to say.

Seeing the expression on his face, the peasant girl suddenly

shouted, "Ugly freak, what are you thinking?"

"Miss," Zhang Wuji said, "Why aren't you happy? Would you tell me?"

Listening to his gentle words, the girl could not throw a tantrum anymore. She dropped herself next to him, holding her head in his hands, and sobbed uncontrollably.

Looking at her shaking shoulders and her waist as delicate as a bee, Zhang Wuji felt sorry for her. "Miss," he said in low voice, "Who bullied you? Wait 'till my legs are healed, I am going to vent your anger for you."

The girl was sobbing continuously. After a while she said, "Nobody bullies me. It's just that I have been unfortunate ever since the day I was born. I always think of one person, and cannot forget him."

Zhang Wuji nodded and said, "He is a young man, isn't he? Was he cruel to you?"

"That's right," the girl replied, "He is very handsome, but also very arrogant. I wanted him to come with me and be with me forever, but he did not want to. That was all right, but why did he have to scold me, hit me, and even bite me bloody?"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "This man is so rude and irrational. Miss, from now on, forget him."

The girl burst into tears and said, "But ... but I can't forget him. He ran far away; I have been looking for him everywhere without ever finding him."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This love affair between a man and a

woman is indeed difficult to resolve. Although this miss' appearance is somewhat lacking, but it is obvious that her love is genuine. Her temperament is rather strange, that is because of the grief in her heart, because of her deep disappointment. It's hard to imagine that that man's heart is this callous toward her!" In soft voice he said, "Miss, don't be sad. There are plenty of good men in this world, why do you have to worry about this man, who do not have any conscience?"

The girl heaved a deep sigh. Her eyes gazed toward a distant place, as if she was in a trance. Zhang Wuji knew that she would not be able to forget this boyfriend, the desire of her heart. He said, "That man scolded you, hit you; but the misery I suffered was actually ten times worse than Miss'."

"What is it?" the girl asked, "Have you been cheated by a beautiful girl?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "At first, she did not intentionally cheat on me; I was stupid, seeing her beauty, I was captivated by her. Actually, how could I deserve her? In my heart, I have never had any vain desire. But she and her father have arranged in secret a treacherous plan to inflict an unspeakable harm on me." While saying that, he pulled his sleeve to show the countless scars on his arm. "These teeth marks were from the bites of her vicious dogs," he said.

Seeing that many scars, the girl flew into a rage. "Was it that girl Zhu Jiuzhen who harmed you?" she asked.

"How do you know?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Everybody within the surrounding area of several hundred 'li' knows that that lowly girl loves to raise vicious dogs," the

girl replied.

Zhang Wuji nodded. "Yes, it was Miss Zhu," he said indifferently, "But these scars have been healed a long time, I no longer feel the pain. I am fortunate to be alive, I don't need to hate her anymore."

The girl stared at him for half a day, but she could not see any trace of anger, he looked at ease; she felt this was rather strange. "What's your name?" she asked, "Why are you here?"

Zhang Wuji mused, "All the way from the Central Earth, people keep asking me about Yifu's whereabouts. They threatened, swindled, committing all manners of crimes that I had to suffer countless sufferings. From now on, Zhang Wuji is dead, nobody in this world knows Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun's whereabouts. Supposing I meet with someone ten times more cunning than Zhu Changling, I won't have to worry about falling into his trap and unintentionally cause trouble to my Yifu." Thereupon he said, "I am called Ahniu [lit. cow/bull]."

The girl slightly smiled. "What's your surname?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji thought again, "I can't say Zhang, Yin, or Xie; those are all not good. 'Zhang' and 'Yin' combined sounds like 'Zeng'." Thereupon he said, "I ... My surname is Zeng. What is Miss' surname?"

The girl's body shook, she said, "I don't have any surname." After pausing for a moment, she slowly said, "My birth father did not want me; he would kill me if he sees me. How can I take Father's surname? My Mama was killed by me, I also cannot use her surname. I was born ugly. You can call me Miss Chou [lit. Ugly]."

Zhang Wuji was stunned. "You ... you killed your Mama?" he asked, "How can that be?"

The girl sighed and said, "It's a long story. Mama was my father's first wife. She had never given birth to any son or daughter; hence Father took Er Niang [Second Mother]. Er Niang gave birth to my two (older) brothers. Father doted on her very much. Later on Mama gave birth to me, her only daughter. Relying on Father's love, Er Niang had always bullied Mama. My two older brothers were also very bad; they helped their mother in bullying my Ma. My Ma could only cry in secret. Tell me, what should I do?"

"Your father should have been more neutral" Zhang Wuji replied.

The girl said, "Because Father constantly shielded Er Niang, I was unbearably angry. I took a blade and killed my Er Niang."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed in shock. He always thought that people kill people in the Wulin world was nothing strange, but that this peasant girl unexpectedly could kill someone with a blade was beyond his expectation.

The girl continued, "Seeing I was in deep trouble, Mama told me to run away at once. But my two brothers pursued me to take me back. Because Mama was helpless to stop them, she slit her own throat to save me. Tell me, didn't Mama lose her life in my hands? When my father saw me, is it possible for him not to kill me?" When she said all these, her intonation was light, without the slightest degree of excitement.

Zhang Wuji, however, listened to her story with his heart thumping madly; he thought, "I am unfortunate that my

parents are dead, but Father and Mother loved each other and they loved me very much. Compared to this Miss' bitter experience, I am actually ten thousand times luckier than she." Thinking to this point, his sympathy for the girl grew. With a tender voice he said, "Have you left home for a long time? Have you been always alone out here?"

The girl nodded slightly. Zhang Wuji asked again, "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," the girl replied, "The world is very big, it doesn't matter if I go to the east or to the west. I will be all right as long as I don't bump into my father or brothers."

Zhang Wuji's heart burst with compassion because he felt they shared the same fate. He said, "Wait 'till my legs are healed, I will accompany you to look for that ... that Dage [big brother]. We'll ask him what he thinks about you."

"What if he scolds me or bites me again?" the girl asked.

"Humph," Zhang Wuji boldly said, "If he dares to harm a single strand of your hair, I will not rest until I deal with him."

The girl said, "What if he simply ignores me, will not speak even one word to me?"

Zhang Wuji was dumbfounded. He thought that he could not force a man to love a woman he did not have any affection to even if he possessed stronger martial art skills. After being silent for half a day, he said, "I will try my best."

Suddenly the girl bent over in laughter, as if she had just heard the funniest joke ever. "What's so funny?" Zhang Wuji asked.

“Ugly freak,” the girl said, “Who do you think you are? Will others listen to you? Besides, I have been looking for him everywhere and did not even see any sign of him. I don’t even know if he is dead or alive. You will do your best? What kind of ability do you have? Ha ha ha ha ...!”

Zhang Wuji was about to open his mouth, but because of her laughter, he blushed and closed his mouth immediately.

The girl saw him opening and closing his mouth, she stopped laughing and asked, “You are going to say something?”

“You laughed at me, I won’t tell you,” Zhang Wuji said.

“Humph,” the girl coldly said, “A laugh is a laugh. At worst I will laugh at you again. You won’t die because of my laughter, will you?”

In a loud voice Zhang Wuji said, “I have nothing but good intentions toward you, you should not laugh at me!”

The girl said, “I am asking you: what is it that you were going to say?”

Zhang Wuji said, “You are all alone, without friends or family. I am of the same fate. My father and mother have died; I have neither brothers nor sisters. I was going to say that if that wicked man still pays no attention to you, there is no harm in us traveling together as companions. I can accompany you and talk to you to relieve boredom. But since you said I am not fit, I might as well not say it.”

The girl said angrily, “You certainly are not fit! That wicked man is a hundred times more handsome than you; he is a

hundred times smarter than you. It is really bad luck that I hang around with you in here, engaging in idle conversation." While saying that, she madly kicked the mutton leg and the roast chicken lying on the snowy ground, and then she ran away while covering her face.

Being on the receiving end of such unreasonable fit of temper, Zhang Wuji did not get angry. He thought, "This Miss is truly pitiful. It's not surprising, considering she has been through many sufferings."

Suddenly the girl rushed back and fiercely said, "Ugly freak, you must be upset with me. You must be thinking that my own face is so ugly yet I am looking down on you. Am I right?"

"No, it's not that," Zhang Wuji shook his head, "Your face is not very good-looking, but as soon as I see you, I feel we can get along well. If you have not turned uglier and looked the same as before ..."

The girl suddenly cried out in alarm. "You ... did you say I do not look the same as I was before?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Compared to the last time we met, your face today looks somewhat more swollen, your skin also darkened somewhat. That is unnatural."

The girl was startled. "I ... I did not dare to look into the mirror these past few days," she said, "Did you say I am getting uglier?"

Zhang Wuji gently said, "For a person, the most important thing is good character. Who cares if one is beautiful or ugly? Mama told me that the more beautiful the women, the worse their conscience and the more they are capable of deceit. She told me to carefully guard against such women."

The girl was not interested in listening to whatever his Mama said. She pressed on, "I am asking you: when you saw me the last time, I was not this ugly, yes or no?"

Zhang Wuji knew that if he answered 'yes', than she would be unbearably heart-broken, therefore, he only stared at her with a blank expression on his face, his heart full of compassion.

Seeing his expression, the girl knew what his answer would be. She covered her face and cried. "Ugly freak, I hate you! I hate you!" she screamed and ran away madly. This time she did not turn back.

Zhang Wuji lay down for two more days. During the night, a wild wolf crawled near him, attracted by the smell. Zhang Wuji struck the wolf dead with his fist. Instead of feeding on Zhang Wuji, the wolf became his dinner instead.

Several days later, his broken legs had healed for the most part. In ten more days at most he would be able to walk again. He thought that henceforth the peasant girl would not come again. He regretted that he did not even ask her name. "How can her face turn uglier?" he mused, "This is indeed a mystery." After pondering this matter for half a day without finding any answer, he gave up and tried to get some sleep.

Around midnight, in his sleep, he heard the footsteps of several people walking on the snow. He woke up immediately and sat up, turning his head toward the direction of the noise. That night the new moon looked like an eyebrow. Under the soft moonlight, he saw that seven people walked in. The silhouette of the one in the front appeared graceful, apparently it belonged to that peasant

girl. When these seven people were near enough, he could see that it was indeed the girl with the ugly face. The other six people were walking in a fan formation behind her, as if they were guarding against her running away.

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished. "Has she been captured by her father and brothers?" he wondered in his heart.

Before he finished this thought, the girl and the six people behind her had come near. As soon as Zhang Wuji looked, he was even more shocked. Turned out these six people were his old acquaintances; they were Wu Qingying, Wu Lie and Wei Bi on his left, and He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, husband and wife, on his right. The one on the extreme right was a middle-age woman. Her face looked somewhat familiar. Turned out she was Ding Minjun of the Emei Pai. "How did she know all these people?" he mused, "Could it be that she is one of the Wulin people who knows my real identity so she is taking all this people to capture me and force me to reveal Yifu's whereabouts?"

Thinking to this point, the suspicion in his heart was gone and anger rose in its place. "I have no enmity no grudges, but you come here to bring harm to me!" he mused. He thought further, "Presently I cannot move my legs. There is not a single weakness among these six people; the peasant girl's martial art may not be weak either. I'd better submit to them and agree to take them to look for my Yifu. When my legs are healed, I will deal with them one by one."

If it were five years ago, he would rather lose his life than submitting to the enemy. No matter how the enemy tortured or intimidated him, he would simply clench his teeth refusing to say anything. But now, first of all he was older, his mind was more open; second, after mastering the Nine Yang Manual, his confidence grew, he was able to deal with dangerous situations calmly. In the presence of powerful

enemies, he did not feel the least amount of fear. The only unexpected thing was that the peasant girl would betray him. In his resentment, he could not help but be grieved. He lied back down and used his arms as a pillow, no longer paying attention to these seven people.

The peasant girl stopped in front of him. She quietly looked at him for a long, long time before slowly turning around and walking away. Zhang Wuji could hear her sigh. The sound was extremely soft, but it was full of grief. He sneered in his heart, "I don't know what malicious intention you have in your heart, but since you already planned it, why fake compassion on me?"

He saw that Wei Bi was swinging the sword in his hand back and forth and he said with a cold laugh, "You said you want to see someone before you die. I thought it must some young man whose appearance was as handsome as Pan An; turns out it as an ugly freak. Ha ha ... funny! Very funny! The two of you are really a pair made in Heaven."

The peasant girl did not get angry. "That's right," she drily said, "I want to see him again before I die. I want to ask him clearly about one thing. After I know his answer, I will die with closed eyes."

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished, he did not understand what these two people were talking about. The peasant girl said, "I have something I'd like to ask you. You must answer me honestly."

Zhang Wuji said, "Anything about me, I can answer truthfully; but if it is about another person, it may not be easy to tell you." He was guessing the peasant girl would ask him about Xie Xun's whereabouts. He had decided to yield to their wish for now, therefore, he stated his condition

first so that later on he would have some leeway in the negotiation.

"Why would I want to know other people's business?" the peasant girl said, "I am asking you: that day you said that both of us are all alone, without friends or family; therefore, you are willing to be my companion. Did you say that with a sincere heart?"

What Zhang Wuji heard was beyond his expectation. He sat up at once, and saw that her eyes showed the grief she bore in her heart. "I did. I was sincere," he said.

"You really do not mind my ugly appearance, and willing to stay together for a lifetime?" the peasant girl asked.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He had never expected this 'staying together for a lifetime' in his heart, but he could not bear to see her forlorn look, as if she was about to cry; thereupon he said, "Ugly or not, pretty or not, I don't care at all. If you want me to accompany you, to talk and laugh together with you, as long as you don't mind me, of course I will be happy to do so. But if you are thinking of deceiving me ..."

"Then are you willing to marry me, to take me as your wife?" the peasant girl asked in a trembling voice.

Zhang Wuji's body shook, and he was speechless for half a day. "I ... I have never thought ... to take a wife ..." he mumbled.

He Taichong and the others, six people broke out in laughter. Wei Bi laughed and said, "Even an ugly bum don't want you. If we don't kill you, what good is it for you to continue living? You'd better hit your head against the rock and die."

Hearing the laughter of the six people and Wei Bi's mocking, Zhang Wuji was convinced that this peasant girl was not in cahoots with these people, and that Wei Bi and the others meant to kill her. The realization that the peasant girl really did not come to harm him, Zhang Wuji's heart grew warm. He saw her hanging her head, with tears dripping down her face, obviously her sorrow was unbearable, only he did not know whether she was sad because she was going to die soon, or because she was ugly, or was it because Wei Bi's mocking was like a blade cutting deep into her heart?

Zhang Wuji's heart was greatly moved, recalling that after his own parents' death, he himself was wandering about in desperate plight, and was the victim of countless others' bullying. This peasant girl was also alone and weak, she was a few years younger than him; she was also more unfortunate than he. Now that she came to him and asked that question, how could he let her broken-hearted to the point of shedding some tears, and suffer disgrace from others? Much less her question showed her sincere devotion to him. "In all my life, other than my parents, Yifu, Tai Shifu and all martial uncles, who else would show such loving care to me? If I treat her well, and she also treats me well, we are bound by a common destiny, what harm can that bring?"

He saw that her body trembled, she was about to go away. Immediately he reached out to grab her right hand. In a loud voice he said, "Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy."

As the girl heard this, her eyes immediately lit up, with a low voice she said, "Ahniu Gege, you are not lying to me, are you?"

"Of course not," Zhang Wuji said, "From now on, I will

cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don't care if I'll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings."

The peasant girl sat down on the ground, leaned against his body, and grabbed his other hand. "I am really happy that you are willing to treat me like that" she said with a tender voice. Closing her eyes, she said, "Please say those words again, let me hear it and remember each word in my heart. Tell me, how are you going to treat me?"

Zhang Wuji was also grateful to see her so happy. Holding her soft and silky smooth hands he said, "I want you to live in safety and joy, I want to make you forget all sorts of past suffering, I don't care how many people come to bully you, to give you trouble, I will protect you without any regard of my own life."

With a tender and sweet smile the peasant girl leaned on his chest and said with a gentle voice, "I asked you to come with me, but you not only refused, you hit me, scolded me, and bit me ... Now you told me those things, I am really happy."

As soon as Zhang Wuji heard her words, his heart turned cold. Turned out this peasant girl was talking with her eyes closed, she was imagining that he was the boyfriend of the past.

The peasant girl felt his body tremble; she opened her eyes and looked at him. Her expression changed suddenly; she looked disappointed and angry, but there was also a hint of regret and tender feelings. Calming herself down, she said, "Ahniu Gege, you are willing to take me as your wife; you did not turn your back to me even though I am an ugly

woman. I am very grateful. But several years ago I have given my heart to someone else. At that time he already had not paid me any attention. If he saw me now, he would not even cast me a glance. He is such a heartless and short-lived little rascal ..."

She was cursing that man as 'heartless and short-lived little rascal', yet her voice was full of longing and tender sentiments.

Wu Qingying coldly said, "He has agreed to marry you, and you two have spoken words of love to each other. Can we start now?"

The peasant girl slowly stood up and said to Zhang Wuji, "Ahniu Gege, I am going to die soon. But even if I live, I cannot marry you. I want you to know that I am very happy to hear what you have just told me. Please do not be angry with me. If you have some free time in the future, please remember me." Her voice was extremely tender and sweet.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. He heard Ban Shuxian's hoarse voice say, "We have kept our words by letting you see this man. Now you must keep your words by telling us who the killer was."

"Alright!" the peasant girl said, "I know for sure that the killer had once hidden in his house." While saying that she pointed her finger to Wu Lie.

Wu Lie's countenance changed slightly. "Humph!" he shouted, "Nonsense!"

Wei Bi angrily said, "Tell us the truth quickly. You killed my Biaomei, who ordered you to do so?"

This time Zhang Wuji's shock was indeed not small. With a trembling voice he said, "Killed Zhu ... Miss Zhu Jiuzhen?"

Wei Bi turned his stare toward him; he asked fiercely, "You know Miss Zhu Jiuzhen?"

"The name of Two Beauties of the Snowy Range shook the heavens, who hasn't heard?" Zhang Wuji replied.

A faint smile appeared on the corner of Wu Qingying's mouth. "Hey!" she loudly called the peasant girl, "Are you or are you not going to tell us who sent you?"

The peasant girl said, "I was sent to kill Zhu Jiuzhen by Kunlun Pai's He Taichong, husband and wife, and Emei Pai's Mijue Shitai."

Wu Lie roared, "You attempt to sow dissension among us is in vain, what good is it for you?" With a loud shout his palm struck toward the peasant girl. This shout carried an impressive power, the palm also created a strong gust of wind causing the snowflakes rise on the ground that snow fluttered in the air.

The peasant girl moved sideways to evade, her movement was fantastic. Zhang Wuji's mind was chaotic, "She ... she is indeed a Wulin character. She killed Xue Jiuzhen, that must be because of me. I told her that I was deceived by Miss Zhu, and was bitten by the vicious dogs she raised. But I have never asked her to kill anybody. I only know that because she is ugly and has been through a misfortune in her family, her temperament turned strange. Who would have thought that she really is capable of killing people without a strong reason?"

Wei Bi and Wu Qingying, each with a sword in their hands,

attacked from left and right. The peasant girl dodged to the east and escaped to the west trying to evade Wu Lie's palm force. Suddenly her slender waist twisted, she turned toward Wu Qingying's side and slapped her on the face, while her left hand reached out and snatched the sword in her hand. Wu Lie and Wei Bi cursed and came together to her rescue. The sword in the peasant girl's hand shook and she called out, "Got you!" as she inflicted a short cut on Wu Qingying's face.

Wu Qingying cried out in fear and leaped backwards. Her injury was actually very light, but she cherished her appearance very much, so when she felt a slight pain on her face, she was frightened out of her wits.

Wu Lie swept his left palm, pressing down on the peasant girl. The peasant girl leaned sideways to dodge. 'Clang!' the sword in her hand crashed with Wei Bi's sword. Right this moment Wu Li's right index finger trembled and sealed the 'fu tu' [subduing rabbit] and 'feng shi' [windy city(?) - I am sure Jin Yong was not talking about Chicago?], two acupoints on the outer side of her left leg. The peasant girl uttered a soft groan as her leg gave up and she fell onto Zhang Wuji's body. She felt her body was comfortably warm, but she could not exert an ounce of strength or the least bit of 'chi', even trying to lift a finger felt like hoisting a thousand-catty load for her.

Wu Qingying raised her sword and hatefully said, "Ugly girl, I won't let you die a quick and painless death. I am going to cut your arms and legs first and I'll leave you here to feed the wolves." She swung her sword down to chop the peasant girl's right arm.

"Hold it!" Wu Lie said, while reaching out to grab his daughter's wrist and pushing her sword away. To the peasant

girl he said, "Tell us who sent you and I'll let you die a quick death. Otherwise, humph, humph! I'll say you won't enjoy rolling around on the snow without your limbs."

With a smile the peasant girl said, "Since you insist, I cannot hide the truth anymore. Miss Zhu Jiuzhen wanted to marry a man. Another pretty woman also wanted to marry this man. This other pretty Miss then gave me five hundred taels of silver, telling me to kill Zhu Jiuzhen. Actually, I should have kept this matter in the strictest confidence ..." Before she finished talking, Wu Qingying's pretty face had turned pale from anger; with a flick of her wrist the sword went straight toward the peasant girls' chest.

The peasant girl was good at observing people and evaluating their situations [orig. 'inspect appearance distinguish/recognize look'. Elif, can you think of a better translation?]; early on she had guessed the awkward situation among the three people, Wu Qingying, Wei Bi and Zhu Jiuzhen, correctly. Deliberately enraging Wu Qingying, her intention was precisely that she would stab her to death quickly. She saw a blue ray flashed and the sword had already arrived at her chest. Suddenly, something flew noiselessly and struck the sword. 'Whoosh!' the sword was knocked out and flew more than a dozen 'zhang' away before it fell on the ground.

In the darkness, nobody saw clearly how Wu Qingying's sword left her hand and flew away, but this kind of force, even if she intentionally wanted to throw it away, she might not have the ability to do so. It was obvious that the peasant girl had a powerful helper.

In their shock, the six people took several steps backward. They looked around, but there were only open spaces in all directions; there were no hills, trees or thick bushes in which

someone might be hiding. As far as their eyes could see, not even half a shadow of other people was to be seen. The six of them looked at each other in alarm and uncertainty.

“Qing’er,” in low voice Wu Lie said, “What happened?”

“Seemed like a very fierce secret projectile,” Wu Qingying replied, “It knocked my sword out of my hand.”

Wu Lie again looked around, but did not see any other people. “Humph,” he said, “Perhaps this slave girl played a trick on you.” But in his heart he felt strange, “She was definitely hit by my Yi Yang Zi [Solitary Yang Finger], how could she still have the strength to shake Qing’er’s sword away? This girl’s martial art is truly demonical.” He strode forward and struck the peasant girl’s left shoulder with his palm. He was using his entire strength with the intention to crush her shoulder bone, so that she would lose her martial art skill and thus give his daughter the opportunity to do to her as she wished.

It seemed that the peasant girl’s shoulder bone would be crushed soon, when suddenly she raised her left arm and met his palm with hers. ‘Crash!’ Wu Lie felt a burning sensation in his chest; the opponent’s palm felt like a raging storm, a torrential flood which was impossible to resist. “Ahh!” he cried out loudly as his body flew backwards, and ‘Bang!’ it hit the ground, hard. Fortunately his martial art skills were superb that as soon as his back touched the ground, he leaped back up. But blood was bubbling up in his chest and abdomen, his vision blackened and his head spun, so that he had just straightened up his body and regulated his breathing when his body swayed and in the end he tumbled down on the ground again.

Wei Bi and Wu Qingying were greatly shocked. They rushed

to prop him up, but suddenly He Taichong said, "Let him lie down for a while longer!"

Wu Qingying turned her head and angrily said, "What did you say?" In her heart she thought, "Father has just fallen under the enemy's attack yet you take delight in his misfortune and ridicule him?"

He Taichong said, "His 'chi' and blood bubbled up, he needs to calm down quietly."

Wei Bi understood immediately. "Yes!" he said, and gently laid his Shifu back to the ground.

He Taichong and Ban Shuxian looked at each other in great surprise. They had fought the peasant girl before, and although her stances and techniques were exquisite and her skill was above average, her internal energy was mediocre. When she exchanged palms with Wu Lie, it was obvious that the internal strength that jolted Wu Lie was extraordinarily strong. This had puzzled them to no end.

In her heart, the peasant girl was even more shocked. When her acupoints were sealed by Wu Lie, she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom, completely unable to move. Very soon Wu Qingying's sword would have stabbed her, but suddenly something flew and shook the sword, while a stream of charcoal hot energy flowed through her leg, burst into her 'fu tu' and 'feng shi' acupoints and flushed the sealed acupoints open. Her body shook; lowering her head, she saw Zhang Wuji's hands were gripping both of her ankles, the stream of hot energy rushing into her body continuously via the 'xuan zhong' [hanging bell] acupoint.

This turn of events happened so quickly that before she had time to think about it, Wu Lie's palm had already come

down. Without thinking she raised her hand up, thinking that broken hand would be better than crushed shoulder bones. Who would have thought that as soon as two palms collided, Wu Lie was jolted more than a 'zhang' backwards by her own palm? She was startled and thought in her heart, "Could this ugly freak bum actually be a martial art master with immeasurably deep skill?"

He Taichong was wary; he did not dare to contend in palm strength with her. Unsheathing his sword, he said, "I want to receive instructions in sword technique from Miss."

The peasant girl laughed. "I don't have any sword!" she said. "Not a problem," Wei Bi said, "I'll lend you mine!" Raising his sword, he aimed the tip of the sword toward the girl's chest and exerting himself, he threw the sword away.

The peasant girl reached out and caught the sword in her hand. She laughed and said, "Your martial art skill is lacking too much, your thrust did not kill me!"

Being a leader of a Sect, He Taichong did not want to take advantage of a younger generation. "You may start," he said, "I will yield to you for three stances before I will attack!"

The peasant girl thrust her sword toward He Taichong's groin. He Taichong snorted in anger. "A junior is being impolite!" he said in low voice, while lifting his sword to block. But there was a 'Crack!' sound as both swords broke at the same time.

He Taichong's face changed greatly; his shadow swayed and he withdrew half a 'zhang' backwards.

"What a pity! What a pity!" the girl exclaimed inwardly.

Turned out Zhang Wuji transmitted his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to her body, but she did not know how to unleash the formidable power of Shen Gong's, which resulted in both swords being broken. If she was able to utilize the power to attack the enemy, only the enemy's sword would be broken, while the sword in her hand would stay intact.

Ban Shuzian was greatly astonished. "What happened?" she asked in a low voice.

He Taichong's arm was still numb and aching. "Demonical!" he said with a bitter smile.

Ban Shuxian drew her sword out. With a cold face she said, "I want to receive instructions."

The peasant girl spread out her hands, her meaning was clear: she did not have any sword. Ban Shuxian pointed towards Wu Qingying's sword, which was fallen on the ground about a dozen of 'zhang' away. "Take that sword!" she ordered.

The peasant girl did not dare to be away from Zhang Wuji's hands; she had no choice but lift the broken sword in her hand, she laughed and said, "This broken sword is all right!"

Ban Shuxian was angry. She mused, "This dead girl is too arrogant to despise me like this." She was not like He Taichong who maintained his position in every aspect as an older generation of high skill level; her sword circled around and pierced the peasant girl's neck. The peasant girl raised her broken sword to block, but Ban Shuxian's sword technique was light and agile to the extreme; the sword quickly cut down on the peasant girl's left shoulder. She quickly flipped her sword to fend off. Ban Shuxian again changed her sword to stab the right side of her body. Ban

Shuxian successively attacked eight times like a whirlwind, but all along she did not dare to meet the peasant girl's broken sword. She only displayed the exquisiteness of her swordsmanship without giving the opponent any opportunity to use her internal energy.

The peasant girl blocked to the left and parried to the right; soon she repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Her swordsmanship was far inferior to Ban Shuxian to begin with, now that she only had a broken sword in her hand and did not dare to move her feet, she could only defend without any possibility of attacking.

Several stances later, the tip of Ban Shuxian's sword flashed and made a slash on the peasant girl's left arm. In Kunlun Pai's sword technique, once one gained the upper hand, one would not allow the enemy even half a chance to take a breather, and pressed on with follow-up stances to advance.

"Ah!" the peasant girl cried out as her shoulder was hit by the sword. "Hey!" she called out, "Aren't you going to help me? Are you going to just watch me being killed?"

Ban Shuxian took two steps back; holding the sword horizontally across her chest, she looked all around, but did not see anybody. Immediately her sword vibrated and the tip created cold plum flowers as she attacked the peasant girl again. The peasant girl frantically brandished her broken sword. After blocking three sword moves, the opponent's sword was getting amazingly fast, but her defense was also amazingly swift. It was a situation where the eyes must be clear and the hands must be quick, there was simply no leeway for miscalculations.

"Dead girl, your hand is quick!" Ban Shuxian praised.

The peasant girl did not want to be beaten; she cursed back, "Dead Granny, your hand is not slow either."

But Ban Shuxian's swordsmanship was from a major school with dozens of years of training. Her mouth was speaking while her hand did not slow down ever so slightly. On the other hand, the peasant girl was no more than seventeen, eighteen years of age; even if she was trained under a great master, how could she copy Ban Shuxian's calm and composed manner even in a fierce battle? As soon as she opened her mouth, her attention was slightly distracted and she felt pain on her wrist immediately as the broken sword in her hand flew away.

"Ah!" the peasant girl cried out in fear as the tip of Ban Shuxian's sword threatened the lower part of her side.

Ding Minjun had been watching from the side without doing anything. Now that she saw a small opening, because it was too late to draw her sword, she launched the stance 'tui chuang wang yue' [push out the window to look at the moon], in which both of her palms struck toward the peasant girl's back. Right this moment, Wu Qingying also leaped in, her leg flew to kick the peasant girl's right waist.

The peasant girl was so frightened that she felt her heart was about to jump out of her throat. Suddenly she felt her whole body was boiling as if she had fallen into a raging furnace. Without thinking she stretched out her finger to flick Ban Shuxian's sword. At the same moment her back was struck by the palms and her waist was kicked.

"Aiyo! Aiyo!" two miserable screams were heard. Ding Minjun and Wu Qingying were thrown backward, while the sword in Ban Shuxian's hand was reduced to a half-section broken sword.

Turned out when Zhang Wuji saw the desperate situation, he sent out his entire 'zhen qi' [real 'chi'] to the peasant girl's body in great speed. By this time, his cultivation of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong had reached about thirty, forty percent of perfection; his power was indeed not small. As a result, Ban Shuxian's sword, both of Ding Minjun's wrist bones, and Wu Qingying's right toes, were all broken.

He Taichong, Wu Lie, and Wei Bi were stupefied; they were momentarily at a loss. Ban Shuxian tossed the broken sword on the ground. "Let's go!" she bitterly said, "Haven't we disgraced ourselves enough?" while her eyes shot a fierce glare toward her husband. Her belly was full of resentment, which she wanted to vent on him.

"Yes!" He Taichong replied. Two people rushed away side by side. In a short moment they had already gone.

Kunlun Pai's 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was excellent; certainly it ranked among the top within the Wulin world. As far as how Ban Shuxian would vent her anger toward He Taichong as soon as they reached home, whether by punishing him by making him kneel in front of her sword, or by subjecting him to another strange Kunlun Pai sword stance, it was not for the outsiders to know.

With one hand supporting his Shifu and the other supporting his martial sister, Wei Bi walked slowly away. The three of them were afraid the peasant girl would pursue and attack them; yet they were unable to run away as fast as He Taichong, husband and wife did. Each step they took was laden with anxiety.

The bones on both of Ding Minjun's wrists were broken, but her feet were not injured. Gritting her teeth and bearing the

pain, she walked away alone.

Pleased with herself, the peasant girl laughed heartily. “Ugly freak! You ...” she said, but before she could finish, she passed out suddenly.

Turned out as soon as Zhang Wuji saw the six people took off their separate ways, he released her ankles. Immediately the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi [the true/real ‘chi’ from Nine Yang] filling her body dispersed that it was as if her body was drained and her limbs and her entire bones were without any strength.

Zhang Wuji was startled, but immediately realized what had happened. Both his thumbs lightly pressed the ‘si zhu kong’ [empty bamboo silk] acupoint on the ends of her eyebrows and transmit a little bit of ‘Shen Gong’.

The girl slowly regained her consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she realized she was lying on Zhang Wuji’s bosom while he was looking at her with a smile on his face; for some reason she felt very bashful. She leaped up immediately, and stared at him with a face that seemed like smiling yet she was not smiling. Suddenly she reached out toward his left ear and twisted it with all her strength.

“Ugly freak,” she scolded him, “You deceived me! You possess such a fierce martial art skill, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Aiyo!” Zhang Wuji cried out in pain, “What are you doing?”

The peasant girl laughed and said, “Who told you to deceive me?”

“When did I deceive you?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You did not

tell me you know martial arts, I did not tell you I know martial arts either."

"All right," the peasant girl said, "I'll forgive you this time, considering you have helped me big time just now, your merit compensates for your crime, I am not going to press charges. How's your leg? Can you walk?"

"Still cannot," Zhang Wuji replied.

The peasant girl sighed and said, "Finally good intentions are being repaid well. If I did not remember you and wanted to see you one more time, you would not help me." After pausing for a moment, she continued, "If I knew your martial art skill level is much stronger than mine, I would not have to kill that witch girl Zhu Jiuzhen."

Zhang Wuji's face darkened. "I did not ask you to kill her," he said.

"Aiyo, aiyo! Turns out you still have this beautiful lady in your heart," the peasant girl said, "My bad, I killed your sweetheart."

"Miss Zhu was not my sweetheart," Zhang Wuji replied, "Even if she were more beautiful, she had nothing to do with me."

"Well! That's strange," the peasant girl exclaimed in amazement, "She had harmed you this bad, yet you don't like it when I killed her to vent your anger?"

Zhang Wuji indifferently said, "There are too many people who have harmed me. If I want to kill each and every one of them to vent my anger, I would have gone on an endless killing spree. Besides, there were some people who

deliberately harmed me, but actually I feel sorry for them. Take Miss Zhu for example, she had always been scared and edgy every day, she was afraid her Biaoge [older male cousin] would not get along well with her, she was always anxious that he would take Miss Wu as his wife. This kind of person, do you think she would be happy?"

The peasant girl got angry. "Are you mocking me?" she said.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback, he did not expect that talking about Zhu Jiuzhen would offend the girl in front of him right now. "No, no," he busily said, "I was talking about how everybody has his or her own misfortunes. If others were unfair to you and you killed them, that is really not good."

The peasant girl laughed. "If you learned martial art not to kill people, then why did you learn it?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, "After we mastered the martial art skill, when bad people mistreat us, we can resist them."

"My utmost admiration!" the peasant girl mocked, "Turns out you are such an upright gentleman, a very good man!"

Zhang Wuji looked at her with a blank expression on his face. He always felt that somehow this girl's demeanor seemed familiar, he felt somehow this girl was related to him.

The peasant girl closed her mouth and asked, "What are you looking at?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "My Mama often laughed at my Papa who was indiscriminately good toward others, saying that he was a soft-hearted scholar. When she said that, her tone and her manner was exactly the same as yours just now."

The peasant girl blushed. "Pei!" she spat, "You are mocking me again. You said I look like your Mama, then you yourself look like your Papa!" Although she was angry, her eyes were actually laughing.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly said, "The Heaven above, if I had the intention of mocking you, let me be condemned by the Heaven and the Earth."

"Talk is cheap," the peasant girl said, "Even if you did mock me, there is nothing serious about it. Why do you have to swear an oath?"

They had just talked to this point when suddenly there was a clear whistle coming from the northeast. The whistle was bright and long, obviously it was coming from a woman. The whistle was responded by someone nearby; apparently it was Ding Minjun who had not gone too far. Ding Minjun immediately stopped.

The peasant girl's countenance changed slightly; she said in a low voice, "Someone from Emei Pai is coming."

End of Chapter 16.

Chapter 17 - Green Wing Appears and Vanishes with a Laugh

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The peasant girl built a snow sled out of firewood, carried Zhang Wuji and sat him on the sled with his legs stretched out straight; and then she pulled the sled swiftly on the snow. Zhang Wuji saw her slender figure sway, her back looked graceful, her posture beautiful. Towing the sled like a breeze of wind flitting across the snowy ground, she sped along for about thirty, forty 'li'.

Zhang Wuji and the peasant girl turned their gaze toward the northeast. It was already dawn. They saw a green shadow walking on the snowy ground with steps as light as a feather. When the shadow was about a dozen of 'zhang' away, they could see clearly that it was a woman wearing a green robe. She talked with Ding Minjun for a while, and then turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and the peasant girl, before finally she walked towards them.

Her clothes fluttered in the wind, her movements were light and graceful, her steps were dainty, but in an instant she was already four, five 'zhang' away from the two people. They saw her style was simple yet elegant, her countenance beautiful, she could not be older than seventeen, eighteen years of age.

Zhang Wuji was amazed; listening to her whistle and looking at her movements, he would have thought that she was a lot older than Ding Minjun, but it turned out that she looked even younger than him. He noticed a short sword hanging on the young woman's slender waist, yet she did not draw her weapon but approached them barehanded.

Ding Minjun warned her, "Zhou Shimei [younger martial sister], this witch girl's martial art is very demonical."

The young woman nodded. With a refined and polite manner

she asked, "May I know your honorable surnames and great given names? For what reason did you injure my Shijie [older martial sister]?"

When she was near enough, Zhang Wuji thought she looked quite familiar. As soon as she spoke, he remembered immediately, "Turns out she is the Hanshui River boatman's little girl, Miss Zhou Zhiruo. Tai Shifu took her up the Wudang Mountain, how did she become Emei School's disciple?"

His heart warmed up; he wanted to ask her about his Taishifu, but then he changed his mind. "Zhang Wuji is dead. Right now I am a bum, the ugly freak Zeng Ahniu. If I am not able to control my emotions, I would only invite inexhaustible calamity in the future. I simply must not reveal my true identity to avoid bringing harm to Yifu, so that my Papa and Mama's death would not be in vain."

The peasant girl laughed coldly and said, "With the 'pushing the window to look at the moon' your honorable Shijie's palms struck my back. She broke her own wrists because of that. How could you blame me? Go ahead and ask your honorable Shijie, did I attack her even for half a stance?"

Zhou Zhiruo flashed a questioning look at Ding Minjun. Ding Minjun angrily said, "Take these two to see Shifu, let the Senior punish them."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "If these two did not offend Shijie intentionally, in Xiao Mei's [little sister - referring to self] opinion, it's always better to let it go, turning an enemy into a friend."

"What?" Ding Minjun angrily shouted, "Are you siding with the outsiders?"

Looking at Ding Minjun's expression, Zhang Wuji remembered one night a few years ago, when Monk PengYingyu was besieged by enemies in the forest, in which Ding Minjun showed hostility toward Ji Xiaofu. History repeated itself today. Ding Minjun again was forcing her will to her young martial sister. He could not help but secretly worry for Zhou Zhiruo. But Zhou Zhiruo was very respectful toward Ding Minjun.

"Xiao Mei will follow Shijie's instructions, will not dare to disobey," she said with a bow.

"Alright," Ding Minjun said, "Seize this stinky girl, break both of her hands."

"Yes," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I am asking Shijie to help watch my back." Turning around toward the peasant girl, she said, "Please forgive Xiao Mei for being rude; I want to request Jiejie's [older sister] expert instructions."

The peasant girl said with a cold laugh, "Where did this wordy girl come from?" While in her heart she said, "Do you think I am afraid of this little girl?"

Without relying on Zhang Wuji's help, she sprang up and fast as a lightning launched three palm strikes in succession. Zhou Zhiruo leaned sideways and rushed forward, her left palm tried to capture the girl's hand. She had used an offensive strike as a defensive mechanism, her gambit was rather ingenious.

Although Zhang Wuji's internal energy was strong, his knowledge of movements in martial arts had not reached the level of complete comprehension. As he watched Zhou Zhiruo and the peasant girl fight a fast-paced battle; Zhou Zhiruo's 'mian zhang' [soft palm] from Emei Pai was agile

and swift, while the peasant girl's palm technique was weird and mysterious, he was very impressed, but also concerned about the two combatants. He did not care who would win; he only hoped that neither one of them would be injured.

The two women fought for more than twenty stances; each had fallen into dangerous situations several times. Suddenly the peasant girl called out, "Got you!" Her left palm hacked down on Zhou Zhiruo's shoulder.

'Rip!' Zhou Zhiruo flipped her hand and pulled the peasant girl's sleeve. Both of them leaped back immediately. Their faces were red.

"Good 'Qin Na' [grab and capture] technique!" the peasant girl shouted. She was about to jump back into the arena when she saw Zhou Zhiruo wrinkle her brows with her hand pressing her chest. She staggered two steps and swayed as if she was about to tumble.

Zhang Wuji could not stop from calling out, "You ... you ..." His face showed a very deep concern.

Seeing this man with long hair and long beard show deep concern toward her, Zhou Zhiruo was secretly astonished.

"Shimei, how are you?" Ding Minjun asked.

Placing her left hand on her martial sister's shoulder for support, Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. Ding Minjun had suffered pain from the peasant girl, she knew the peasant girl was very fierce. It was just that their Shifu often praised this young martial sister, saying that her perception was wonderfully deep, her progress was amazingly rapid. She would most likely play a very important role on the advancement of their Sect in the future. It was hard for Ding

Minjun to accept, therefore, she told her to give it a try, with the hope that she would also suffer some pain under the peasant girl's hands. Seeing her Shimei was able to fight the peasant girl for more than twenty stances without suffering any defeat, which exceeded her by a large margin, Ding Minjun was very jealous in her heart.

Feeling the hand leaning on her shoulder was without any strength, she knew her Shimei's injury was not light. Afraid that the peasant girl would attack, she said hastily, "Let's go!" Supporting each other, the two of them walked toward northeast.

The peasant girl noticed Zhang Wuji's expression. "Ugly freak," she said with a cold laugh, "Seeing a beautiful girl makes your soul fly to the heavens."

Zhang Wuji wanted to explain, but he thought, "I won't be able to explain this matter clearly without revealing my history. I might as well not say anything." Thereupon he said, "Whether she is beautiful or not, what does that have anything to do with me? I was concerned about you, I was afraid you might be injured."

"Are you telling me the truth?" the peasant girl asked.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Actually, I was concerned about both of you." He said, "Why would I lie to you? I am surprised that such a young girl from Emei Pai can possess such an excellent martial art skill."

"Fierce! Very fierce!" the peasant girl said.

Zhang Wuji turned his gaze toward Zhou Zhiruo's back, thinking that she came with light and graceful steps but left staggering. He remembered how on the boat on the Hanshui

River she helped feed him, gave him towel to wipe his tears. He wished her injury was not heavy.

Suddenly the peasant girl laughed coldly and said, "You don't have to be worried, she was never been injured. When I said 'fierce', I was not talking about her martial art skill, but she is such a young girl, yet her quick thinking and scheming ability is this fierce."

"She was not injured?" Zhang Wuji was surprised.

"That's right!" the peasant girl said, "When my palm hacked on her shoulder, her shoulder produced internal energy reaction, which diverted my palm. Turns out she has trained the Emei Jiu Yang Gong [Nine Yang energy/power], with which she shook my arm that it went slightly numb and painful. Where did her injury come from?"

Zhang Wuji was greatly delighted; he thought, "Could it be that she is highly favorable in Mijue Shitai's eyes that unexpectedly she passed on the Emei Pai treasured skill, Emei Jiu Yang Gong, to her?"

Suddenly the peasant girl heavily slapped Zhang Wuji's face with the back of her hand. Her action was so sudden that Zhang Wuji was caught off guard and his cheek turned red and swollen at once.

"You ... why did you do that?" he angrily asked.

The peasant girl hatefully said, "Seeing that beautiful girl, your soul fly to the heavens. I said she was not injured, why are you this happy?"

"I am happy for her, what does it do to you?" Zhang Wuji replied.

The peasant girl swung her palm again, but this time Zhang Wuji ducked that she missed. The peasant girl angrily said, "You said you are going to take me as your wife. It is still less than half a day and you already changed your mind as soon as you saw that pretty girl."

"You have said it early on that I am not fit to marry you," Zhang Wuji retorted, "You also said that your heart has already belonged to this boyfriend of yours, so you cannot marry me."

"That's right," the peasant girl said, "But you have promised me that you will treat me well for the rest of our lives, that you will take a good care of me."

"Of course I will keep my promise," Zhang Wuji said.

The peasant girl was angry. "If that's the case, why did you lose your soul as soon as you saw this good-looking young woman? That is very aggravating to those who look at you."

Zhang Wuji laughed. "I did not lose my soul," he said.

"I forbid you to like her," the peasant girl said, "I forbid you to even think of her."

"I've never said I liked her," Zhang Wuji said, "But why do you always have another in your heart, and never forget him?"

"I met him first," the peasant girl said, "If I know you first, then all my life I would be good to you only, and would not think about other people. This is called 'faithful unto death' [Confucian ban on widow remarrying]. The Heaven will not tolerate a double-minded person."

Zhang Wuji thought, "I knew Zhou family girl long before I met you." But it was inappropriate for him to say so, thereupon he said, "If you are good to me only, then I will be good to you only. If you remember another in your heart, I will also remember another in my heart."

The peasant girl was silent for half a day. Several times she seemed to open her mouth to speak, but each time she stopped. Suddenly tears started to flow from her eyes. She turned around so Zhang Wuji would not see her wiping her tears with her sleeve.

Zhang Wuji could not bear to see her crying. He grabbed her hand and said in a soft voice, "Why did we say these things without any reason at all? In a few more days my legs will be healed, and then the two of us will travel everywhere to have fun, won't that be great?"

The peasant girl turned her head; with an anxious look on her face she said, "Ahniu Gege, I want to ask you one thing, but you must not get angry."

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked, "As long as it is within my power, I will do it for you."

"You must promise me not to get angry first before I tell you," the peasant girl said.

"Alright, I won't," Zhang Wuji promised.

The peasant girl hesitated for a moment before saying, "With your mouth you said you won't get angry, but I also want you not to be angry in your heart."

"Alright, I also will not be angry in my heart," Zhang Wuji

said.

The peasant girl flipped her hands so that she was holding Zhang Wuji's hands now. "Ahniu Gege," she said, "The reason I travelled for tens of thousands 'li' from the Central Plains to this remote Western Region was to look for him. Before, I still heard news about him; but as soon as I arrived here, he vanished just like a stone sank in the ocean and I have never heard anything about him anymore. After your legs are healed, help me to find him, and afterwards I will accompany you roaming the mountains and playing on the rivers, will that be alright?"

Zhang Wuji could not restrain from feeling unhappy. "Humph," he snorted.

The peasant girl said, "You promised me not to get angry; aren't you angry right now?"

Feeling uncomfortable, Zhang Wuji said, "Alright, I'll help you find him."

The peasant girl was delighted. "Ahniu Gege," she said, "You are very kind." Looking toward the distant horizon, her heart was beating fast with the memory of 'him', she said quietly, "When we find him, he will know that I have been looking for him for such a long time that he won't be angry with me. I will do whatever he says, I will obey whatever he tells me to do."

Zhang Wuji said, "Tell me, what is so good about this boyfriend of yours that you always keep him in your mind like this?"

The peasant girl smiled slightly and said, "How can I explain how good he is? Ahniu Ge, do you think we will be able to find him? When he sees me, will he beat me, scold me?"

Seeing how childish her affection was, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel sorry for her. He said in a low voice, "I don't think so. He will not beat you or scold you."

The peasant girl's cherry lips quivered; tears welled up in her eyes. Also in a low voice she said, "That's true, he will love me and pity me that he won't beat me or scold me anymore."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This girl loves her boyfriend this much. If only there was someone in this world who loves me and misses me like her, I will be happy even if I have to suffer more hardships and pain." He turned his gaze to the pair of footprints Zhou Zhiruo and Ding Minjun left on the snow, thinking, "I wish Ding Minjun's footprints were mine; if I could walk side by side with Miss Zhou ..."

"Aiyo!" suddenly the peasant girl called out, "Let's go, quick! It will be too late if we tarry."

"What?" Zhang Wuji was awakened from his daydreaming.

The peasant girl said, "That Emei girl was not willing to fight with me so she feigned injury. But that Ding Minjun insisted on her to take us to see their Shifu. Mijue Shitai must be somewhere near. This old thief nun always loves to outdo others, how can she not come over?"

Zhang Wuji recalled how Mijue Shitai struck Ji Xiaofu to her death without showing any mercy; he could not help from shuddering. "This old nun is very fierce," he said in fright, "We are definitely not her match."

"Have you met her?" the peasant girl asked.

"She is the Emei Pai Zhangmen [Sect Leader], how can she

be an ordinary person?" Zhang Wuji replied, "I can't walk yet, you'd better run away quickly."

"Humph," the peasant girl was angry, "How can I abandon you and escape alone? You think my conscience is that bad?" Creasing her eyebrows, she thought hard for a moment. She took several pieces of stiff firewood from the pile and twisted the flexible ones as the ropes to build a snow sled. Carrying Zhang Wuji in her arms, she helped him sit on the sled with his legs stretched out straight; and then she pulled the sled toward the northwest direction.

Zhang Wuji only saw her slender figure sway, just like a lotus leaf blown by the early morning breeze; her back looked graceful, her posture beautiful. She towed the sled just like a breeze of wind flitting across the snowy ground.

She sped along without pausing for about thirty, forty 'li'. Zhang Wuji felt bad for her. "Hey, let's get some rest first!" he called out.

The peasant girl laughed. "Who do you called 'hey'?" she said, "Don't I have a name?"

"You don't want to tell me; what can I do?" Zhang Wuji replied, "You wanted me to call you Miss Chou, but I think you are attractive."

The peasant girl scoffed; she let out a mouthful of breath then halted her steps. Pushing a stray hair, she said, "Very well, there is no harm in telling you. I am called Zhu'er."

"Zhu'er, Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji said, "You are truly a precious pearl." [Translator's note: 'zhu' of 'spider' and 'pearl' sound the same in Chinese, and 'pearl' is a more common name for girls.]

“Pei!” the peasant girl spat, “Not ‘Zhu’ of pearl [zhen zhu], but ‘Zhu’ of spider [zhi zhu].”

Zhang Wuji was stunned. “Who would have used this ‘spider’ character as a name?” he mused.

“That’s my name,” Zhu’er said, “If you are scared, don’t call me.”

“Did your Papa give you that name?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“Humph,” Zhu’er said, “If my Papa gave me that name, do you think I would want it? It was my Ma. She trained me the ‘qian zhu wan du shou’ [hand of a thousand spiders ten-thousand posion], so she said for me to use that name.”

Hearing the five characters ‘qian zhu wan du shou’, Zhang Wuji shuddered inwardly.

“I have started training since I was a kid, yet I still have far to go,” Zhu’er said, “When I have mastered this skill, I will not have to fear this old thief nun Miejue. Do you want to see it?” While saying that, she took a glistening yellow gold case from her bosom. She opened the lid and showed two spiders, about the size of a thumb, squirming inside.

The spiders’ back were spotted with bright, multi-colored dots, dazzling the eye. Zhang Wuji immediately remembered that Wang Nan’gu’s Poison Manual did mention that the spotted spiders were the most poisonous insects; once a human was bitten, he would be beyond help. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel very scared.

Looking at his serious expression, Zhu’er laughed and said, “You know the benefit of my precious spiders. Just wait a moment.” As she said that, she leaped onto a large tree and

looked around. Then she leaped back down to the ground and said, "Let us go a little bit farther; we can leisurely talk about spiders later."

Pulling the sled along, she ran about seven, eight 'li' until they arrived at the edge of a canyon. She helped Zhang Wuji out of the sled and she put several large rocks in his place. Pulling the sled, she ran toward the canyon. When she got to the edge of the canyon, she abruptly halted her steps, while the sled continued its journey into the canyon below. The sled, along with the rocks on it, crashed into the canyon with a loud, resounding sound, which continued for a long time.

Zhang Wuji turned his head back and saw the firewood sled had left a pair of tracks, snaking on the snowy ground, as far as his eyes could see. Following the tracks with his eyes, he saw the tracks disappeared at the edge of the canyon. He thought, "This girl's thinking is so thorough. If Mijue Shitai followed us here, she would think that we fell into the snowy canyon below, and died with none of our bones survived."

Zhu'er stooped down and said, "Get on my back!"

"Are you going to carry me? You will be too tired," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhu'er rolled her eyes and said, "Do you think I won't know it if I am tired or not?"

Zhang Wuji did not dare to talk too much, he quietly got on her back and very lightly hugged her neck.

Zhu'er laughed and said, "Are you afraid you will choke me to death? Your hands and feet are very light; you are only tickling me to death."

Seeing she was so innocent and without any apprehension toward him, Zhang Wuji was delighted; he hugged her neck tighter. Zhu'er leaped up suddenly and brought him flying to a tree. The row of trees extended toward the west, so Zhu'er leaped from one tree to another, also heading west. Her stature was small and delicate; Zhang Wuji was big and tall, but her feet were nimble and did not show the least bit of being over-burdened.

After leaping about seventy, eighty trees, she jumped to a mountain wall and then leaped down to the ground. She gently lowered him to the ground, and said with a laugh, "We are going to build a cowshed in here. This is the perfect place."

"Cowshed?" Zhang Wuji wondered, "Why would we build a cowshed?"

"For the bull and the cow to stay, of course," Zhu'er laughed, "Aren't you called Ahniu?" [Translator's note: The 'niu' character of Ahniu means 'cow/bull'.]

"That's not necessary," Zhang Wuji said, "In four, five days, my broken legs will be healed completely. Actually, if I am forced to walk, I think I can manage without problem."

"Humph!" Zhu'er said, "Forced to walk? Right now you are already an ugly freak, if your cow legs are lame, will you look good?" While saying that, she took a strip of branch and swept the snow accumulated beside the mountain rock.

Hearing her say, 'Will you look good if your cow legs are lame?' Zhang Wuji suddenly realized that she had a deep concern toward him; he could not help his heart from being touched. He heard her humming a tune while pulling and breaking branches and twigs to build a canopy in between

two boulders, so that the thatched roof and the boulders formed a hut, an attractive little cabin which they could use to take shelter.

As soon as the hut was finished, Zhu'er scooped piles and piles of snow and spread the snow on the roof. Working hard for half a day, she got the hut completely hidden in snow that it was not visible from the outside. Only then did she stop, took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from her face.

"Wait here," she said, "I am going to find something to eat."

"I am not that hungry," Zhang Wuji said, "You are too tired. Why don't you take a short rest before going again?"

Zhu'er said, "If you want to treat me well, you must treat me really well. If you only sweet-talk me, what good would that bring?" Without waiting for an answer, she entered the woods in quick steps.

Staying on the mountain rock, Zhang Wuji recalled Zhu'er's tender voice and her graceful manners, which was the style of a refined woman. Her face might be ugly, but he remembered how just before her death, his mother had admonished him, 'The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be. You must take more caution.' Zhu'er was not pretty, yet her treatment to him was fabulous; he had a mind of spending the rest of his life with her. However, her heart had already belonged to another man; she had no regard of him in her heart.

Zhang Wuji's heart was like a tidal wave as his mind raced in myriads of thoughts. Shortly afterwards Zhu'er returned with two snow birds. She built a fire and roasted the birds; it was tasty beyond comparison. Zhang Wuji ate one bird clean to its bone, but it was not enough for him. Zhu'er pursed her

lips and laughed then she pushed her two bird legs, which she saved earlier, to him. Actually, she saved the legs because it was her favorite part of the chicken.

Zhang Wuji was about to decline when Zhu'er angrily said, "If you want to eat, just eat. Whoever speaks to me with pretense, saying something without meaning it, I will stab three holes on his body with a knife."

Zhang Wuji did not dare to talk too much, he ate the two bird legs. Because his mouth was greasy, he picked up a handful of snow from the ground and wiped his face, then used his sleeve to dry it up. Zhu'er happened to turn her head and saw him wiping his face clean. She could not help from being startled and stared at him.

Zhang Wuji was embarrassed; "What is it?" he asked.

Zhu'er said, "How old are you?"

"Twenty one," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Hmm," Zhu'er said, "You are only three years older than I am. Why do you have such a long beard?"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "I lived alone in a remote valley deep in the mountains, I have never met anybody else, so I have never thought of shaving."

Zhu'er took out a knife with golden handle from her side and raised it to his face to shave him slowly. Zhang Wuji felt the blade was very sharp; everywhere the knife touched, hair immediately fell. Feeling her soft and tender palm and fingers, Zhang Wuji could not stop his heart from beating faster.

The knife slowly arrived at his neck. Zhu'er laughed and said, "If I exert a little bit more force, your throat will be cut and you'll become a ghost. Are you or are you not afraid?"

Zhang Wuji also laughed, "To die under Miss' jade-like hands, I will become a happy ghost."

Zhu'er flipped the knife and pressed hard on his throat with the back of the knife. "Then be a happy ghost!" she shouted.

Zhang Wuji was scared and wanted to jump, but her movement was swift, the knife was also very close. As he was about to jump, the blade had already slashed. He was powerless to resist, but the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside his body reacted automatically and shook the knife sideways. It was then that he knew she was only using the back of the blade.

Zhu'er felt a jolt on her arm. "Aiyo!" she cried out, but then giggled immediately. "Are you happy?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and nodded his head. His natural disposition was rather serious, but in front of Zhu'er he somehow felt free and unrestrained. It was as if he had known her since childhood and they grew up together; he felt unexplainably at ease and even had an urge to joke around with her.

Finished with shaving him clean, Zhu'er stared at him for half a day. Suddenly she heaved a deep sigh.

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhu'er did not reply, she trimmed his hair a little bit, combed it, and tied the hair into a bun. She carved a hairpin from a tree branch and stuck it into his bun. After he was tidied up,

although his clothes were tattered and unsightly (as a matter of fact, the clothes were too short and a few sizes too small for him, as if they were stolen clothes), his countenance glowed; the ugly freak has turned into one handsome young man.

Zhu'er sighed again and said, "I have never thought you are such a handsome man."

Zhang Wuji knew she was disheartened by her own ugliness; thereupon he said, "I am not that handsome. Besides, among the beautiful things in this world, oftentimes there is some bad thing hidden inside. The peacocks are adorned with beautiful feathers, but their gallbladders are extremely poisonous. Manchurian cranes' crest are bright red, very pretty, who would have thought that it was the most lethal poison? Within the various snakes and insects, oftentimes the more beautiful it looks, the more venomous it is. Aren't those two spiders of yours beautiful? What good is it to have a handsome appearance? A good heart is more desirable."

Zhu'er sneered and said, "What good is it to have a good heart? Why don't you explain it to me?"

Zhang Wuji could not find the answer right away. After being silent for a while, he said, "A man with a good heart will not harm others."

"What good is it in not harming others?" Zhu'er pressed.

Zhang Wuji said, "If you don't harm others, you will have a peaceful heart, you will be calm and composed."

"I don't feel happy if I don't harm others," Zhu'er said, "If I can make others miserable beyond words, then my heart will be happy and peaceful, and then I will be calm and

composed."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "You are forcing anarchy and robbing justice," he said.

With a cold laugh Zhu'er said, "If not for the purpose of harming others, why would I want to train this 'qian zhu wan du shou'? I have to endure vast and limitless pain and suffering, do you think it was all for fun?" While saying that, she sat cross-legged on the ground, and after circulating her internal energy for a while, she took the small golden case from her bosom, opened the lid, and stuck her two index fingers into the golden case.

The pair of colorful spiders inside the case crawled slowly toward her fingers and then the spiders bit the tip of her fingers separately. She took a deep breath, her arms slightly trembled as she used her internal energy to resist the poison. The colorful spiders fed on her blood, but in turn Zhu'er sucked the spiders' venom into her body by reversing her blood flow.

Zhang Wuji saw her face was solemn while at the same time a faint black layer appeared on the center of her eyebrows and both of her temples. She clenched her teeth to endure the pain with all her might. A moment later, beads of perspiration started to form on the tip of her nose.

Zhu'er trained this special skill for almost an hour, until the spiders were full with blood, with their belly bulged that they looked like a couple of furry balls; they dropped on their belly inside the case and fell asleep. Zhu'er continued circulating her internal energy for a good while. The blackness on her face gradually disappeared and the blood returned to her cheeks. When she exhaled, Zhang Wuji could smell that her breath was fragrant, but he felt dizzy immediately. Obviously

her breath contained a violent poison.

Zhu'er opened her eyes and smiled slightly. Zhang Wuji asked, "How do you train to reach perfection?"

Zhu'er said, "Each colorful spider must turn to black, and then from black turn to white, then the venom is exhausted and it will die, while the poison inside the spider is completely transferred into my fingers. I need at least a hundred spiders to reach small success. To really reach perfection, a thousand or two are not considered too many."

Hearing her saying so, Zhang Wuji could not restrain the hair on his back from standing up. "Where did you get these many spiders?" he asked.

"One way is to raise them, they can produce little spiders," Zhu'er replied, "Another way would be to catch them in their original habitat."

"There are so many different martial art skills in the world," Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "Why must you train this kind of poisonous skill? The spiders' venom is extremely violent; granted that you have a way to withstand it if it enters your body, but in the long run it won't give you any benefits."

With a cold laugh Zhu'er said, "No doubt there are many different martial art skills in the world, but which one school's skill is superior to this 'qian zhu wan du shou' in terms of fierceness? You may rely on your strong internal energy, but when I reach perfection, you may not necessarily be able to withstand one poke of my finger." While saying that, she concentrated her 'chi' into her finger, and then casually poked her finger into a tree by her side. Because her internal energy had not reached perfection, her finger only went half an inch deep into the tree.

Zhang Wuji asked again, "How did your Mama teach you this skill? Did she complete the training herself?"

Zhu'er's eyes suddenly shone with a malicious light; she hatefully said, "In training this 'qian zhu wan du shou', as long as one has consumed more than twenty spiders, the venom accumulated in one's body is already considerable, one's countenance will be deformed. If the training reaches a thousand spiders, one's face will be incomparably ugly. My Mama had almost reached a hundred spiders when she met my father. Because she was afraid her countenance would grow uglier and would make my father unhappy, she discarded the entire skill from her body. As a result, she turned into an ordinary woman who lacked the strength to even truss up a chicken. Although she turned back into a pretty woman, but receiving Er Niang [second mother] and my two older brothers' bullying and insults, unexpectedly she did not have the least bit of ability to fight back. In the end she still had to lose her life. Humph! What good is it to have a pretty face? My Ma was a very beautiful and extremely refined woman. Just because she did not bear a son, my father took a concubine ..."

Zhang Wuji's eyes swept over her face. "So ... it was because you train this skill ..." he said in a low voice.

"That's right," Zhu'er said, "It was because I train this skill that the poison turned my face to look like this. Humph, if that heartless man pays me no attention, just wait 'til I master the 'qian zhu wan du shou'. When I find him, if he does not have any woman by his side, then that's all right ..."

"You are not married to him," Zhang Wuji cut her off; "You also are not engaged to him, you're just ... you're just ..."

"Just say it straight out, what are you afraid of?" Zhu'er said, "You wanted to say that I am just indulging myself in unrequited love, didn't you? What if I am? Since I have already fallen in love with him, I cannot let another woman occupy his heart. If he is heartless and wishy-washy, I'll let him taste my 'qian zhu wan du shou'."

Zhang Wuji stifled a laugh, but he did not argue with her, realizing that she had a weird character; when she was good, she was really good, but when she was bad, she would not listen to reason at all. He also remembered that his Tai Shifu, Er Shibo [second martial (older) uncle) and the others would often tell him to avoid Wulin people of the heretical way. Apparently the 'qian zhu wan du shou' she trained was one of the most ruthless martial art skills of the heretical sect. Her mother must also be a top ranking demon of the heretical sect. Thinking to this point, he could not help but feel somewhat apprehensive toward her.

Zhu'er, however, did not realize the change in his mood; she was busy going in and out of their little hut. She picked a lot of wild flowers and arranged them inside the hut. Seeing the elegant taste with which she decorated the hut, Zhang Wuji knew that her good taste must have come from her natural instinct, it was the poison that caused her face to be ugly.

"Zhu'er," he said, "After my legs are healed, I am going to pick some herbal medicine to try to cure the poison swelling on your face."

When Zhu'er heard these words, her expression suddenly turned fearful. "No ... no ... don't," she said, "I have endured countless pain to reach today's level. Do you want to neutralize my 'qian zhu wan du shou' skill?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Perhaps we can think of a way to eliminate

the swelling of the poison on your face without any adverse effect to your skill."

"No way," Zhu'er said, "If there were a way, my Mama would have inherited the skill, how could she not know? In this world, other than the Divine Doctor Hu Qingniu of the Butterfly Valley, nobody else has this kind of astonishing ability. But he ... he has died many years ago." [Translator's note: the original was 'yi xian' - medicine/medical immortal. Previous chapters also use 'Sage of Healing'.]

"You know Hu Qingniu?" Zhang Wuji asked in astonishment.

Zhu'er stared at him and said, "What? Something strange? The name of Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley was known throughout the Jianghu, everybody knew him." She heaved a deep sigh and continued, "Even if he was still alive, he had the reputation as Seeing Death Without Helping, [orig. Jian Si Bu Jiu. Previous chapters also used 'The One who Ignores the Dying'.] what good is it to see him?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "She did not know that the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley had passed on his entire skill to me. I'd better not mention it now, someday I'll think of a way to cure the poison swelling on her face, it will be a big pleasant surprise for her."

While they were talking, the sky turned dark. They leaned on mountain rocks inside the hut to catch some sleep. In the middle of the night, Zhang Wuji suddenly heard one or two sobbing noises in his sleep. He woke up with a start only to find Zhu'er crying. Zhang Wuji sat up immediately and reached out to gently pat her shoulder twice.

"Zhu'er," he said, trying to comfort her, "Don't be sad." Who would have thought that with his gentle words, Zhu'er cried even louder as she placed her head on his shoulder?

"Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji asked, "What is it? You are thinking about your Mama, aren't you?"

Zhu'er nodded. "Mama is dead!" she said in between sobs, "I am all alone. Nobody likes me, no one's good to me."

Zhang Wuji pulled his lapel and slowly wiped her tears. "I like you," he said in a gentle voice, "I am good to you."

"I don't want you to be good to me," Zhu'er said, "I only like one man, but he ignored me, beat me, scolded me, and he even bit me."

With a trembling voice Zhang Wuji said, "Why don't you forget this unfortunate young man? I'll marry you, I will treat you well for the rest of your life."

"No! No!" Zhu'er loudly said, "I won't forget him. If you tell me to forget him, I am going to ignore you forever."

Zhang Wuji was greatly embarrassed; fortunately it was very dark inside the hut that Zhu'er could not see his red and awkward expression. For a good while nobody said anything.

A long time afterwards, Zhu'er said, "Ahniu Gege, are you angry at me?"

"I am not angry at you," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am mad at myself, I shouldn't have said those words to you."

"No, no!" Zhu'er hastily said, "You said you wish to take me as your wife, you will treat me well for the rest of my life, I love to hear it. Can you say it one more time?"

Zhang Wuji indignantly said, "Since you cannot forget that

man, what else can I say?"

Zhu'er reached out to grab his hand. "Ahniu Gege," she said in a soft voice, "Please don't be angry. I offended you. My mistake. If you really take me as your wife, I might prick your eyes blind, I might kill you."

Zhang Wuji shuddered. "What did you say?" he asked in shock.

Zhu'er said, "If you are blind, you won't see my ugly face, you won't look at that Miss Zhou from Emei Pai. If you still cannot forget her, with one finger I will stab you dead, with one finger stab that Miss Zhou from Emei Pai dead, and with one finger stab myself dead." She said those strange words with ease, as if what she was going to do was in accordance with the heaven's law and the earth's principle.

Hearing her ruthless words, full of maliciousness, Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat. Right this moment, suddenly from a distant came an old voice, "In which matter did Miss Zhou of Emei Pai give you trouble?"

Zhu'er was startled, she leaped up and said in a low voice, "It's Mijue Shitai!"

Her voice was so low, but the person outside could still hear her. "That's right," she said sternly, "It is Mijue Shitai."

When the person outside spoke the first few words, the voice sounded from a far, but the second time she spoke, she was already outside the little hut.

Zhu'er knew their situation was far from good, but it was too late for her to pick Zhang Wuji up and hide; she had no choice but holding her breath without saying anything.

“Get out!” they heard the person outside said with a cold voice, “Do you think you can hide inside forever?”

Zhu'er opened the straw curtain and walked out holding Zhang Wuji's hand. She saw about two 'zhang' outside the hut stood an old nun with white hair and dreary face, she was none other than Emei Pai's Zhang Men [sect leader], Miejue Shitai. Behind her, about a dozen people, divided into three groups, came rushing in. As they arrived, they stood on either side of Miejue Shitai. Half of those people were nuns, the rest were men and women in civilian clothes. Ding Minjun and Zhou Zhiruo were among them. The male disciples stood at the back row. Miejue Shitai had never favored male disciples, Emei Pai male disciples had never learned the most advanced of their school's martial art, their status was somewhat lower than the female disciples.

Miejue Shitai coldly looked at Zhu'er to size her up without saying anything for half a day. With trepidation, Zhang Wuji was crouching behind Zhu'er. He had made up his mind that if Miejue Shitai attacked Zhu'er, he would do his utmost to help her, although he knew he was not Miejue Shitai's match. He heard Miejue Shitai humph and she turned toward Ding Minjun.

“Was it this baby girl?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ding Minjun replied respectfully.

Suddenly they heard 'Crack! Crack!' twice, Zhu'er uttered a muffled grunt, while she was thrown about three 'zhang' backward with broken wrists. She fainted on the snowy ground.

Zhang Wuji only saw a grey shadow flashed as with inhuman speed footwork Miejue Shitai dashed toward Zhu'er, with

inhuman speed hand technique she broke her wrist bones and threw her out, and again with inhuman speed footwork she returned to her previous position, and stood loftily like an ancient tree. She looked so ghostly yet also grand standing in the night breeze. Each one of her actions was nimble yet so clear. Zhang Wuji could see each movement clearly, yet her speed was unfathomable. He was so astonished by her speed that he was paralyzed in fear.

Miejue Shitai stared at Zhang Wuji with a piercing-heart-and-soul vision. "Get out!" she sternly said.

Zhou Zhiruo took a step forward. "Shifu," she reported, "This man's legs are broken; he cannot walk."

"Make two snow-sleds, take them go," Miejue Shitai said. The disciples complied at once.

The dozen or so male disciples with quick hands and feet built two sleds. Two female disciples carried Zhu'er, two male disciples carried Zhang Wuji. They put them on the sleds and pulled the sleds behind Miejue Shitai who had already sped to the west.

Zhang Wuji focused his attention, trying to hear or see if Zhu'er was astir. He did not know the severity of her injury. After travelling for about a 'li', he heard Zhu'er groan softly.

"Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji called out loudly, "How's your injury? Have you received an internal injury?"

"She broke my both my wrist bones," Zhu'er replied, "But my chest and abdomen seem to be fine."

"No internal injury, that's good," Zhang Wuji said, "Use your left elbow to bump your right arm three 'cun' five 'fen' [1 cun

is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is approximately 1/3 of a centimeter or a little over 1/8 of an inch] below the bend, and use your right elbow to bump your left three 'cun' five 'fen' below the bend. That should lessen your pain somewhat."

Before Zhu'er could respond, Miejue Shitai had already exclaimed, "Ah!" She turned her head toward Zhang Wuji, stared at him and said, "This kid is proficient in medical skill. What's your name?"

"Zaixia [lit. under/below, the humble one] surnamed Zeng, called Ahniu," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Who is your Shifu?" Miejue Shitai asked.

Zhang Wuji said, "My shifu was a nameless country doctor of a small town; Shitai would not know him even if I mentioned his name."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, but no longer paid him any attention.

The party travelled straight until the dawn before they stopped to eat their rations. Zhou Zhiruo took out several cold steamed buns and gave them to Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er. As she gave the buns to Zhang Wuji, she looked up at his face for a second before turning her head away.

Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken; he could not bear it any longer. "Your kindness in feeding me on the Hanshui River boat, I will never dare to forget," he said softly.

Zhou Zhiruo's whole body trembled; she quickly turned around and looked at him. This time Zhang Wuji was clean-shaven. She looked at him for a while. "Ah," she suddenly

exclaimed with a pleasantly surprise expression. "You ... you ..." she stammered. Zhang Wuji knew she finally recognized him, he slowly nodded his head.

"The cold poison in your body, is it healed?" she quietly asked. Her voice was as soft as a mosquito that it was almost inaudible.

In the same soft voice Zhang Wuji replied, "It is healed."

Zhou Zhiruo's face blushed, and she walked away.

All this time, Zhu'er was behind Zhang Wuji. She saw Zhou Zhiruo could not contain her joy; her lips quivered, her face also appeared bashful, but her eyes brightened. Zhu'er waited until Zhou Zhiruo left before she asked Zhang Wuji, "What were the two of you talking about?"

Zhang Wuji's face reddened. "What? No ... nothing," he said. "Humph!" Zhu'er snorted, "Barefaced liar!"

They rested for about an hour and a half before continuing their journey in haste to the west, and continued in the same manner for three days. Apparently they had some important matter to attend to. Along the way, whether when travelling or resting, neither the male nor female disciples opened their mouths to talk, unless it was absolutely necessary; it was as if they were a bunch of mute people.

By this time Zhang Wuji's legs were already healed. He could walk if he wanted to, but he maintained his guise as a cripple. Every now and then he would fake a groan so Miejue Shitai would not guard against him. He was waiting for a good opportunity to help Zhu'er to escape. However, the terrain they had been travelling so far was a vast plain, before they could run too far, the pursuers would certainly

overtake them; therefore, he did not dare to act recklessly. He quietly mended Zhu'er's broken wrist; Miejue Shitai only gave him a cold look, but did not interfere. During their stops in the day, or in their bivouacs at night, Zhang Wuji was dying to get a glimpse of Zhou Zhiruo, but she had never come close to him anymore.

After travelling for two more days, they arrived at the great desert in the afternoon. The snow on the ground had melted; the sleds were now being pulled over sand. Suddenly they heard horse hooves coming from the west. Miejue Shitai signaled with her hand. The disciples immediately hid themselves behind sand dunes. Two disciples drew their daggers and placed the daggers on Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er's back. Their intention was clear: Emei Pai was ambushing of the enemy, as soon as Zhang Wuji or Zhu'er made any noise to warn the enemy, they would thrust the daggers forward and take their lives.

It seemed like the horses were galloping very fast, only they were still very far away that it took almost half a day before the horses came near. As soon as the riders saw footprints on the sand, they reined their horses at once. Emei Pai's senior disciple Jing Xuan Shitai waved her whisk; about a dozen disciples responded to her signal by leaping out from their ambush and surrounding the riders.

Zhang Wuji took a peek to see there were four riders altogether, all wearing white robes. The robes were embroidered with a red blazing flame. Realizing they were being ambushed, the four riders shouted, drew out their weapons, and charged toward the northeast trying to break the siege.

Jing Xuan shouted, "It's the Devil Cult's demons, don't let even one of them escape!"

Although Emei Pai had more people, they did not attack together. Two female disciples and two male disciples responded to Jing Xuan Shitai's order. They shouted their compliance and stepped forward to block the enemies. The four Devil Cult's people fought valiantly with curved sabers in their hands. But in the expedition to the western region this time, Emei Pai had sent their choice fighters; each one possessed strong martial art skill. After only about seven, eight stances, three of the Devil Cult people were killed by the swords and were thrown down from their horses. The remaining one was a lot stronger than his companions; he managed to chop and injure the Emei Pai male disciple's left shoulder and rushed through this opening to escape.

When he was several 'zhang' away, the third ranking Emei Pai disciple, Jing Xu Shitai called out, "Get down!" With a swift footwork she caught up with the man. Her whisk swept toward the man's left leg. The man brandished his saber to block. Jing Xu's whisk suddenly changed its course; 'Shua!' it struck the back of the man's head.

This move had hit the man's vital point, the whisk also carried a profound internal energy; the man immediately fell down from his horse. Surprisingly this man was extremely swift and fierce; even under such a severe injury, he still attempted to perish together with the enemy. Spreading out his arms, he threw himself on Jing Xu. Jing Xu leaned sideways to evade while her whisk lashed on the man's chest.

Right that moment, from the cage hanging on the neck of the last man's horse flew three white pigeons. "What devilish trick are you playing?" Jing Xuan called out. Her sleeve shook, three iron lotus seeds flew toward the three pigeons.

Two pigeons were shot down. The third iron lotus seed was shot down by a secret projectile launched by the white-robed man, who at this time was lying on the ground. The last white pigeon dashed toward the cloud. The numerous Emei Pai disciples immediately launched their secret projectiles, but none hit its target. They saw that the pigeon was flying toward northeast.

Jing Xuan waved her left hand. The male disciples immediately dragged the four white-robed men and stood them in front of her.

From the initial attack toward the enemy down to shooting the pigeons and capturing the men, Mijue Shitai only looked coldly with her hands behind her back. Zhang Wuji thought, "She dealt with Zhu'er personally, which showed that she held Zhu'er in considerably higher regard; perhaps it was because she shook Ding Minjun's wrists broken. If this old nun wanted to stop that white pigeon, all she needed to do was to lift her finger; what's the problem with that? But she seemed to intentionally ignore her numerous disciples' effort in dealing with the situation."

Zhang Wuji also recalled how Jing Xuan, along with Ji Xiaofu and the others, had come up the Mount Wudang to wish his Taishifu happy birthday. Clearly she was considered of the same rank as the various Sect Leaders of Kunlun, Kongtong, and other sects. By this time these Emei Pai's senior disciples had held quite a reputation within the Jianghu; any one of them was fully capable to assume sole responsibility in important matters. In dealing with several Devil Cult people, Mijue Shitai did not need to personally go into action. The fact that Jing Xuan and Jing Xu had personally put forth their hands showed that they had a high regard toward the enemy.

A female disciple picked up the two shot down pigeons. She

took a roll of paper out from the small tube tied on the white pigeon's leg and presented it to Jing Xuan. Jing Xuan unrolled the paper and read.

"Shifu," she said, "The enemy has found out our plan to besiege the Brightness Peak. This letter is an emergency call for help to the Heavenly Eagle Cult." She looked at the other roll of paper and said, "Exactly the same. Too bad the other pigeon escape from the net."

"Why do you feel bad?" Miejue Shitai coldly said, "Let the devils gather together. We'll wipe them out in one swoop. Won't it be a happy occasion? It will save us running around to the east and to the west looking for them."

"Yes," Jing Xuan said.

Hearing the words 'emergency call for help to the Heavenly Eagle Cult Heavenly Eagle Cult', Zhang Wuji was startled. "Isn't the Heavenly Eagle Cult Leader my 'wai gong' [maternal grandfather]?" he mused, "I wonder if he, the Senior, would come. Humph, this old nun is so arrogant; you may not necessarily be my Grandfather's match."

Originally, he wanted to find an opportunity to help Zhu'er escape, but with this turn of events, he wanted to continue watching the drama unfold, thereupon he did not want to leave just yet.

Jing Xuan sternly asked the four white-robed men, "Who else did you invite? How did you find out about the Six Major Sects' plan to besiege the Devil Cult?"

The four white-robed men laughed bitterly with their eyes to the sky, then suddenly they fell down to the ground, motionless. Two male disciples stooped down to take a look;

they saw the contorted smile on the four men's faces, it was obvious that they stopped breathing.

"Shijie [older martial sister]," they called out in fear, "They all dead!"

Jing Xuan indignantly said, "The witches took poison to kill themselves. The poison is very lethal, the reaction was this quick.

Jing Xu said, "Search them."

"Yes!" four male disciples complied. They were about to search the corpses' pockets when Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, "Shixiong [martial brothers], be careful. There might be poisonous things hidden inside their pockets."

The four male disciples were startled; they drew out their weapons to search the pockets. They saw something was wriggling inside the pocket. Turned out in each pocket were hidden two extremely venomous snakes. If they had used their hands to search the pockets, they would have been bitten by the snakes. All disciples' faces changed; everybody cursed the Devil Cult disciples as poisonous and ruthless in their actions.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, "From the Central Earth we came to the west, today was the first time we dealt directly with the Devil Cult disciples. These four men were merely nameless pawns, but they were already this sinister. Can you imagine how we are going to deal with the leaders and the brains behind the Devil Cult? Humph, Jing Xu, you are not young anymore, but they way you handle matters is this careless, not as careful as Zhiruo."

Jing Xu's face reddened; she bowed down to accept the

reproach.

In his heart, Zhang Wuji was still pondering Jing Xuan's words earlier, 'Six Major Sects besiege the Devil Cult'. "Six Sects? Six Sects?" he mused, "I wonder if our Wudang Pai is one of those Sects?"

About the second hour that night, suddenly they heard the jingle of bells usually mounted on camel's heads. It sounded like there was a camel approaching from a distance. Everybody was actually asleep, but they were awakened at once. At first the sound of the camel came from the west heading to the south, but a short time later it sounded like the camel ran from south to north, but as soon as the sound arrived at the northwest direction, it immediately turned east, and then the sound appeared again from the northeast. In this way the sound came from east and west just like a ghost.

The people looked at each other in bewilderment. Everybody thought that no matter how fast the camel could run, it was impossible for it to be on the east at one time and suddenly on the west. From the sound of it, it was also unlikely that there were several people on the four directions who rang the bell one after another.

After a while, it sounded like the camel bell came toward them from a distance, the bell grew clearer and clearer. Suddenly the bell rang loudly from the southeast, as if the camel was a bird, which flew swiftly.

Coming to this great desert and hearing this kind of strange ringing bell, Emei Pai people were inwardly frightened. In clear voice Miejue Shitai said, "Which master is paying us a visit? Please come out to meet us. Won't it be highly improper, playing tricks like this?" Her voice travelled far.

After she spoke those words, the bell suddenly turned silent, as if the person ringing the bell was afraid of her and did not dare to play tricks anymore.

Nothing happened all day the next day, but by the second hour in the evening, the camel bell returned. Suddenly going afar, suddenly coming near, suddenly it was on the east, suddenly it moved to the west. Miejue Shitai repeated her reprimand, but this time the camel bell ignored her. Sometimes the sound was light, another time it was loud. Sometimes it sounded as if the camel galloped in anger towards them, but suddenly it walked away sadly from them. It just drove everybody nuts.

Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er looked at each other and smiled. Although they did not understand how the bell could make this kind of weird noise, they knew it must be the doings of a Devil Cult's master to disturb the Emei people and render them helpless. Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er found it amusing to see them at a loss like this.

Miejue Shitai waved her hand; the disciples lay back down to sleep, no longer paid any attention to the bell. The bell made a loud noise. Although it changed pattern a hundred times, the Emei people simply turned a deaf ear to the sound, apparently they were no longer interested in the bell. Suddenly the bell rang loudly on the north and then vanished. It seemed that Miejue Shitai's tactic 'seeing demon as not a demon, let the demon defeat itself' was somewhat effective.

By daybreak the next day, everybody was busy tidying up their clothes and blankets, preparing themselves for the journey ahead. Two male disciples suddenly cried out in alarm, because they saw somebody was lying next to them,

sleeping soundly. This person's body was covered from head to toe with a filthy blanket, not the least bit of his body was exposed; his buttocks curved upward, he was snoring loudly.

The rest of the Emei Pai people also jumped in fright. Last night numerous people took turns in night-watch duty, but how could nobody knew someone was coming and that he mingled with them? Miejue Shitai's martial art skill had reached such a level that even grass blown by the wind or a petal of a flower flying or a leaf falling would not escape her eyes and ears; but how could she not know there was an extra person in the midst of her disciples?

Everybody was startled and ashamed. Two disciples immediately drew their swords and walked toward the man. "Who is it? What trick are you playing?" they shouted.

The man was still snoring loudly, seemingly oblivious of everything around him. A male disciple used his sword to lift the blanket and saw an impressive-looking man wearing dark green robe over white long gown. The man was sleeping soundly with his face to the ground.

Jing Xu knew that since the man dared to come like this, he must have an extraordinary background. She took a step forward and said, "Who are you, Sire? What business do you have here?"

The man's snoring was getting louder, like the rumble of a thunder. Seeing the man was this rude, Jing Xu was enraged; she brandished her whisk. 'Shua!' the whisk lashed toward the man's buttocks which were sticking up. 'Whoosh!' suddenly the whisk somehow left Jing Xu's hand and flew vertically up for more than ten 'zhang' to the sky. Without realizing it, everybody looked up...

"Jing Xu, watch out!" Mijue Shitai called out. She had just closed her mouth when the man in dark green robe had already moved several 'zhang' away. His steps were so swift it looked like he was flying; he carried Jing Xu in his arms across his chest.

Jing Xuan and another senior female disciple, Su Mengqing, each with a sword in her hand, quickly pursued; but the man's movements were so fast they were almost fantastic, the pursuers definitely would not be able to catch up. Mijue Shitai let out a clear whistle, and then with the treasured Yitian Sword in her hand she also ran after them.

The Sect Leader of Emei indeed possessed an extraordinary skill. In the blink of an eye she had already passed Jing Xuan and Su Mengqing. A dark shadow flashed as the sword pierced toward the man's back. But the man was really fast, the sword missed him by almost a foot and thus he escaped unscathed. The fact that he was carrying Jing Xu did not have any adverse effect on his speed; he was not by any means slower than Mijue Shitai.

He did not run away, but ran in circles around the Emei people as if he intentionally wanted to show off his skill. Mijue Shitai repeatedly thrust her sword forward, but all along she failed to stab his body.

Suddenly they heard a 'Pat!' as Jing Xu's whisk fell back down on the ground. By this time, Jing Xuan and Su Mengqing had stopped pursuing. Everybody watched with baited breath as about a dozen 'zhang' away where the two masters were chasing each other. Although they were running on a desert ground, both people's feet were like flying that the sand did not fly upwards.

The Emei disciples noticed that in that man's arms, Jing Xu

did not move at all, as if she had already died; their hearts were scared. A lot of the Emei disciples had the desire to step forward to intercept, but remembered their Shifu's prestige, how could she lower her rank by asking her disciples for help? If the incident ever spread out, wouldn't they be the laughingstock of the heroes and warriors of the Jianghu? It was a highly suspenseful moment, but nobody dared to take any step forward. They only wished their Shifu would be one step faster than she would be able to stab that weird-looking man's back.

In the meantime, the man and Miejue Shitai had made three large circles around the people. If only Miejue Shitai were one step closer, her sword would injure the enemy. However, she was always one step too late. Although that man started first and Miejue Shitai managed to catch up with him, the man was carrying a person, which added his burden by more than a hundred catties. Therefore, in this 'qing gong' contest, although they could be considered even in terms of speed, Miejue Shitai was still one notch inferior to the man.

By the fourth circle, the man turned around abruptly and stretching out his arms, he threw Jing Xu over to Miejue Shitai. Miejue Shitai only felt a strong wind in front of her face as Jing Xu arrived with an irresistible force. Hastily she concentrated her 'chi' into her legs and with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty fall] she gently caught Jing Xu.

The man let out a long laugh and said, "The Six Major Sects come to besiege the Brightness Peak. I am afraid it won't be that easy!" While saying that, he ran northward.

When he raced Miejue Shitai earlier, the sand underneath their feet was not stirred up at all, but this time the yellow sand rose high behind him, surging on to the north with an overwhelming power that it looked like a giant dragon,

several dozen 'zhang' long, which immediately blocked his shadow from view.

The Emei disciples rushed toward their Shifu only to see Mijue Shitai's face paled; she did not say anything.

"Jing Xu Shijie ..." suddenly Su Mengqing cried out in fear. Jing Xu's face looked like yellow wax, there was an open wound on her throat, apparently she had stopped breathing. The wound was covered in blood, but there were teeth marks around it; obviously she was bitten to her death by that strange man.

The female Emei disciples broke out in loud crying. "What do you cry for?" Mijue Shitai shouted, "Bury her." Everybody stopped crying at once and buried Jing Xu right there.

"Shifu," Jing Xuan respectfully asked, "Who was that demon? Let us remember him clearly in our hearts that we can avenge Shimei later."

Mijue Shitai coldly said, "This man sucks blood from the neck, he is ruthless and savage; he must be one of the Devil Cult's four kings, the 'Qing Yi Fu Wang' [green-winged bat king]. I have long heard that his 'qing gong' is unparalleled in the world; apparently his reputation is well-deserved, he defeated me by a large margin."

At first, Zhang Wuji hated Mijue Shitai for her ruthlessness, but now that he witnessed how in the face of huge changes she was able to maintain her composure, to keep her coldness as if nothing happened, as well as her ability to praise the enemy and not ashamed to admit her own shortcomings, which befit her status as a grandmaster of a prominent Sect, he could not restrain his respect toward her from growing.

Ding Minjun hatefully said, "He did not dare to fight Shifu; always ran away, what kind of hero is he?"

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted. 'Slap!' suddenly she slapped Ding Minjun's mouth while angrily said, "Shifu cannot overtake him, cannot save Jing Xu's life. He won. Victory or defeat is known to the world. Is hero or warrior a self-proclaimed title?"

Half of Ding Minjun's face immediately turned red and swollen. "I accept Shifu's lesson. Disciple knows her own fault," she respectfully said, while in her heart she said, "You cannot beat others and lost face, but vent your frustration on me. Just consider my bad luck!"

"Shifu," Jing Xuan said, "Could you please tell us more about this Qing Yi Fu Wang?"

Miejue Shitai waved her hand without answering Jing Xuan's question; she walked forward. As the rest of the disciples saw how their martial sister had bumped her head against the wall, nobody dared to say anything. They continued their journey in silence until evening, when they built a large fire and slept behind a sand dune.

Miejue Shitai sat motionless with her gaze fixed on the fire, she looked like a stone statue. Seeing their Shifu had not slept, nobody dared to sleep. In this way they waited for more than two hours. Suddenly Miejue Shitai thrust both of her palms forward, creating a blast of strong wind. 'Bang!' the bonfire died down at once.

Everybody was still sitting motionless. The cold moon cast its clear light on everybody's shoulders. Suddenly a sad feeling crept into Zhang Wuji's heart. "Will Emei Pai's awe-inspiring prestige collapse completely in this western region? Will they

suffer a total defeat from the enemy?" he mused. He also thought, "Whatever happens, I must save Miss Zhou, but the Devil Cult's people are this fierce, what can I do to save others?"

Suddenly he heard Miejue Shitai shout, "Kill the demon fire, extinguish the devil fire!" And then after a brief pause she continued slowly, "The Devil Cult regards the fire as sacred, reveres the fire as deity. After the death of their thirty-third generation Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] Yang Dingtian, the Devil Cult does not have any Jiaozhu. Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness, Four Great Hu Jiao Fa Wang, Five Wanderers, as well as the Five Flag Leaders of Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth Flags, all covet this Jiaozhu position so much so that they fight and massacre each other, and thus the Devil Cult became weak. Although each of the upright major sects is prosperous, I believe it is not easy at all to seek the destruction of this demonical and heretical people if they are not in the midst of this internal strife."

[Translator's note: here I repeat my note in chapter 30: 'hu jiao fa wang' ('hu' – protect, 'jiao' – Cult, 'fa' – law, 'wang' – king) has been translated as 'Protector King' throughout this novel. I believe the more accurate translation should be 'Protector of the Cult, Law Enforcement King', or 'Judge'. The same 'fa wang' was translated 'imperial priest', as in Jin Lun Fa Wang, in Shen Diao Xia Lu – RoCH; in different story, it is also translated as 'Dharma King. I am going to keep using the term 'Protector King', interchangeably with 'fa wang' for the remainder of this novel; I just want the readers to know that the term carries a broader sense than simply 'Protector King.']

Zhang Wuji had heard the name 'Devil Cult' ever since he was little, but because his own mother was somehow related to the Devil Cult, each time he asked, his parents did not look

too happy. When he asked his Yifu, his Yifu would stare blankly as if he was entranced, then all of a sudden he would be thrown into a violent rage. For this reason, he had never known what the Devil Cult was. Later, when he was with Tai Shifu Zhang Sanfeng, who also abhorred the Devil Cult, whenever he brought it up, Tai Shifu would earnestly warn him, telling him to never, ever, mess with the Devil Cult people or make friends with them. However, Zhang Wuji then met Hu Qingniu, Wang Nan'gu, Chang Yuchun, Xu Da, Zhu Yuanzhang, and other warriors, which were all Devil Cult people. These people were generous, just and loyal; they might not necessarily evil. It was just that their actions were sometimes underhanded that to the outsiders they were often unfathomable. This moment, as he listened to Miejue Shitai talk about the Devil Cult, he perked up at once and listened attentively.

Miejue Shitai continued, "The Devil Cult's previous generations' Jiaozhu had always passed on the Sheng Huo Ling [lit. the order of the sacred fire] to the next generation as their token of authority. But to the thirty-first generation Jiaozhu, God rest his soul, the Sheng Huo Ling was somehow vanished without a trace. Hence the thirty-second and thirty-third generations Jiaozhu did not have this token of authority, and thus these two Jiaozhu led the Cult quite reluctantly. Yang Dingtian died suddenly. Nobody knows whether he was poisoned or fell under the enemy's plot, but he did not have enough time to appoint his successor. The number of highly-skilled devil-heads within the Devil Cult is truly not a few; there are at least five, six people who are qualified to be the Jiaozhu. You don't submit to me, I won't yield to you; and thus internally they are in a big chaos. Until today, they still do not have any Jiaozhu. The one we met today also wanted to be the Jiaozhu. He is one of the Devil Cult's Four Great Protector Kings, Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao." [Translator's note: The character 'Yi' of 'Qing Yi Fu

Wang' (green-winged bat king) refers to thin wings like those of dragonfly, not the wing of feathered birds. The title of the chapter "... with a laugh" refers to Wei Yixiao's name (Yi Xiao - one laugh).]

The disciples had never heard the name Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao before, they stayed silent.

Miejue Shitai continued, "This man has never set foot on the Central Plains; the way the Devil Cult's people handle matters is also extremely surreptitious. For this reason, although this man's martial art skill is strong, he does not have the least bit of fame in the Central Plains. But I am sure you all know about the Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king] Yin Tianzheng and Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun, two people, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji shivered inwardly. Zhu'er softly exclaimed in surprise, 'Ah!' Yin Tianzheng and Xie Xun's reputation was so widespread that nobody in the Wulin world could claim that they had never heard those names.

"Shifu," Jing Xuan asked, "Are those two also belong to the Devil Cult?"

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, "Of course they belong to the Devil Cult, what else? 'Mo Jiao Si Wang, Zi Bai Jin Qing' [The Devil Cult's Four Kings: Purple White Gold and Green], Zi Shan Long Wang [purple-robed dragon king], Bai Mei Ying Wang, Jin Mao Shi Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang are the Devil Cult's four kings. The Green Wing is ranked the last, yet today all of you have seen his skill with your own eyes; you can imagine the skills of Zi Shan Long Wang, Bai Mei Ying Wang and Jin Mao Shi Wang. Jin Mao Shi Wang has gone insane and has done many despicable things. More than twenty years ago he suddenly went on killing the innocents

indiscriminately. Finally he disappeared and his whereabouts became Wulin world's big mystery. Yin Tianzheng failed to be the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, in his anger he founded another Tian Ying Cult [Heavenly Eagle]. His sickness was that he craved to be a Jiaozhu. I know that since Yin Tianzheng has forsaken the Devil Cult, he became like water and fire with the Brightness Peak. Who would have thought that when the Brightness Peak is facing a calamity, they still ask the Heavenly Eagle Cult for help?"

Zhang Wuji's heart was in chaos; he had known early on that his foster father and (maternal) grandfather's conduct was heretical, which most of orthodox people would not tolerate; but he had never thought that those two people were actually the Devil Cult's Protector Kings.

While being busy with his thoughts, he did not hear what the Emei disciples were talking. A little while later he heard Mijue Shitai continue, "We, the Six Major Sects, are currently in a mission to destroy the Brightness Peak. We will prevail. Even if the demons and witches are united, what do we fear? It's just that during the battle, many will be injured or dead. No one must have a faint heart; we should not rely on luck. If fear overcomes our hearts, then we will degrade Emei Pai's power and prestige in the presence of our enemy." The disciples jumped to their feet at once. They bowed in compliance.

Mijue Shitai continued, "Whether one's martial art skill is strong or weak, it all depends on talent and destiny, we cannot force it at all. Before Jing Xu even had a chance to launch a stance, she had fallen under the enemy's scheme and died in the hands of that blood-sucking demon. Nobody can sneer at her. What is the purpose of training martial arts? Is it not to rob the rich and give it to the poor, to destroy the demons and devils? Today Jing Xu was the first to die. Who

knows? Perhaps the second one will be your own Shifu. Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, Kunlun, Kongtong and Huashan, the Six Major Sects' mission is to besiege and destroy the Devil Cult. We, the Emei Pai, have earlier disregarded good luck or bad luck, disaster or happiness ..."

In his heart Zhang Wuji thought, "Our Wudang is indeed among them." Deep in his heart he felt that his journey to the west this time would bring him to see countless wretched disasters, which eyes could not near to see, and ears could not bear to hear. And thus he seriously considered taking Zhu'er to escape so that they would not have to witness the war and massacre among the Jianghu people.

In the meantime, Mijue Shitai said, "The proverb says it well: 'A thousand coffins go out the door, the home prospers. The children survive, the father dies first; and thus the descendants mourn their ancestors.' [Translator's note: this is a literal translation of the text. I am not sure about the background of this saying. Any help will be greatly appreciated.] Who in the world would not die? As long as we leave behind our successors, we can still prosper even though there are hundreds or thousands of deaths in the family. I am only afraid that you will all die and leave the old nun live alone." She paused for a moment before continuing, "Hey, hey, even if that happens, I will have no regrets. A hundred years ago, was it not that Emei Pai did not even exist? As long as every one of us is fighting with everything we have, wouldn't that be enough if Emei Pai had to meet its destruction?"

With boiling blood, the disciples' drew out their weapons and responded in loud voices, "Disciples vow to fight to the death; we will not co-exist with the people of demonic way."

Mijue Shitai laughed drily and said, "Very good! You may sit

down!"

Although the majority of Emei Pai disciples were weak women, Zhang Wuji had to admit that they possessed heroic spirits, which enable them to brave death without frowning. He thought that it was not by accident that Emei Pai was considered one of the Six Major Sects, and certainly not only because of their superiority in martial arts. Witnessing this scene, he was reminded of how Jing Ke went west to enter the Qin [Jing Ke was supposedly the would-be assassin of King Ying Zheng of Qin], with the sadness of 'the mournful wind rippled the cold water, the warrior departed on a one-way mission.'

Actually, these words should be spoken before they embarked on this mission, while they were still thinking that the Devil Cult was weakened by internal strife that it would be easily destroyed with just a raise of the hand. They had not anticipated that in the middle of disintegration, the demons of the Devil Cult were still able to join hands in resisting outsiders' invasion. Now that Qing Yi Fu Wang had made his move, the situation was substantially different.

Sure enough, Zhang Wuji heard Miejue Shitai say, "If Qing Yi Fu Wang could come, then Bai Mei Ying Wang and Jin Mao Shi Wang could also come. The possibility of Zi Shan Long Wang, the Five Wanderers, and the Five Flag Commanders to come is even greater. We, the Six Major Sects, originally thought that with our combined forces, we would be able to destroy Guangming Zuo Shi [the Left Emissary of the Brightness] Yang Xiao first, then sweep out the other demons one by one. Who would have thought that this time the prediction of Huashan Pai's Shen Ji Xiansheng [Mr. Divine Strategist], Xianyu Zhang Men's [Sect Leader Xianyu] is inaccurate? Hey, hey, he is totally off the mark."

Jing Xuan asked, "What kind of evil devil-head is that Zi Shan Long Wang?"

Miejue Shitai shook her head. "Zi Shan Long Wang's evil conduct is obscure; I myself only heard bits and pieces about him. I heard when this person failed to be the Jiaozhu, he immediately escaped to the distant overseas and no longer communicated with the Devil Cult. It would be best if he stays out of this. 'Mo Jiao Si Wang, Zi Bai Jin Qing'. This person is the chief among the Four Kings, needless to say, he is the most difficult to be dealt with. Other than Yang Xiao, the Devil Cult has another Emissary of the Brightness. From generation to generation, the Devil Cult has always had Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness, whose positions are above the Four Hu Jiao Fa Wang. Yang Xiao is the Guangming Zuo Shi [Left Emissary of the Brightness]; but the name of the Guangming You Shi [Right Emissary of the Brightness] is actually unknown to the people of the Wulin world. Kong Zhi Dashi [reverend] of Shaolin Pai and Song Yuanqiao, Song Daxia [great hero] of Wudang Pai, both are warriors with vast experience and knowledge, but even they did not know it. Yang Xiao is our enemy; in a frontal battle, victory or defeat will be decided by our martial art skill, which is fine with me. My main concern is if that Guangming You Shi suddenly launches a sneak attack."

The disciples were scared; without realizing it, they turned their heads around as if that Right Emissary of the Brightness or the Purple-robed Dragon King suddenly came and launched a sneak attack. Under the cold moonlight, everybody's face looked deathly pale.

Miejue Shitai indifferently said, "Yang Xiao killed your Gu Hongzi Shibo [martial (older) uncle], he also killed Ji Xiaofu. Wei Yixiao killed Jing Xu. Between Emei Pai and the Devil Cult there is an enmity as high as the heavens. Since our Sect was

founded by Guo Zushi [ancestor master], the Zhang Men position has always been held by a virgin woman. Not to mention that a man will not have any part in this position, even a woman, if she is married, cannot hold the Zhang Men position. However, today our Sect is facing a life and death, exist or perish situation; how can I adhere strictly to the norms? In this mission, whoever set a great merit will inherit my cassock and alms bowl, I don't care if it is a man or a married woman."

The disciples hang their heads in silence; they felt their Shifu was making an arrangement for things to do after her death, discussing the appointment of her successor, as if she knew that she would not return to the Central Earth alive. In everybody's hearts there was a third part of uncomfortable, mournful feeling.

Miejue Shitai let out a long, loud laughter, "Ha ha, ha ha ..." her voice travelled far into the distant over the great desert. The disciples looked at each other in a start; inwardly feeling scared. Miejue Shitai waved her sleeve and loudly said, "Everybody, sleep!"

As usual, Jing Xuan arranged the night watch.

"No need for night watch," Miejue Shitai said.

Jing Xuan was startled, but then she understood. If a master of Green-winged Bat King's caliber attacked in the middle of the night, how could the disciple find out? Night watch would be futile.

That evening the Emei Pai seemed relaxed outwardly, but very tense inwardly; they seemed to be scattered loose, but actually in a very tight formation, ready for any unanticipated matter.

End of Chapter 17.

Chapter 18 - The Cold and Bright Ray of the Yitian Sword

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a bright ray flashed, the sword in Yin Liting's hand flew to the north, shooting toward the Taoist priest's back. The sword passed through his body and still flew forward. The Taoist priest's feet did not stop; he still ran at least two 'zhang' forward before finally he fell, dead.

The next day they continued their journey westward and did not stop for more than a hundred 'li'. It was around midday, the sun was shining brightly overhead, although it was the depth of the winter, they felt hot.

Continuing after the rest, suddenly they heard faint noises of weapons clashing and people shouting, coming from the northwest direction. Without waiting for Jing Xuan to give an order, everybody quickened their steps, rushing toward the noise. Shortly afterwards, they saw ahead that several people were dodging and attacking in a violent battle. When they were near, they saw three Taoist priests in white robes with weapons in their hands were surrounding a middle-aged man. The three Taoist priests' left sleeves were embroidered with red blazing flame; apparently they were Devil Cult disciples. The middle-aged man brandished a long sword, the sword's ray flickered; he fought the three Taoist priests intensely. With one against three, he did not show any sign of defeat.

Zhang Wuji's legs were already healed for some time, but he still pretended that he could not walk, so he stayed on the sled so that the Emei Pai people would not guard against him, while he waited for a good opportunity to take Zhu'er and escape. Right now, an Emei male disciple was standing in front of him, blocking his view that he had to lean over to see the four people fighting. He saw the middle-aged man's sword was getting faster and faster. Suddenly the man turned around and shouted. 'Shua!' his sword slashed one Devil Cult's Taoist priest's chest.

The Emei disciples cheered. Zhang Wuji could not restrain himself from calling out in surprise. The move was called 'shun shui tui zhou' [lit. push the boat along the current]; it was a unique skill from the Wudang's sword techniques, because the middle-aged man who launched the stance was

precisely Wudang Pai's Sixth Hero, Yin Liting.

The Emei disciples watched the battle from a distance and did not step out to help at all. As the other two Devil Cult Taoist priests saw one man down from their side, and the enemy had increased in number, their hearts sank. With a sudden whistle they ran separately, one to the north, the other to the south.

Yin Liting flew to pursue the Taoist priest running to the south. His feet were a lot faster; only seven, eight steps later, he had already reached the Taoist priest's back. The Taoist priest turned around and brandished his pair of sabers wildly; staking everything he had with the intention to take the enemy down with him.

The Emei Pai disciples realized it would be difficult for Yin Liting to chase two enemies at once; the Taoist priest who ran to the north's 'qing gong' was not bad either, he ran faster and faster. It appeared that even if Yin Liting managed to kill the Taoist priest who ran to the south, he would not be able to turn around to chase and kill the one running to the north. There was an enmity as deep as the ocean between Emei disciples and Devil Cult people; everybody looked at Jing Xuan, waiting for her to issue the order to block the escaping enemy. Most of the female disciples were good friends of Ji Xiaofu; they all thought that had it not because of the crime of Devil Cult's villain, this Sixth Hero of Wudang would have been their Sect's in-law. This moment they all hoped to lend him a helping hand.

Jing Xuan was also hesitating; she thought that the Sixth Hero of Wudang held a prominent position within the Wulin world, if he did not ask for help and other people rashly put out their hands, it would be disrespectful for him. That was the reason she did not immediately issue the order to

intercept; she would rather the Taoist priest escape than offending the Wudang's Yin Liuxia [sixth hero].

Suddenly they all saw a bright ray flashed, the sword in Yin Liting's hand flew to the north. Swift like the wind, fast like a lightning, it shot toward the Taoist priest's back. The Taoist priest suddenly felt this incoming attack, but by the time he was about to evade, the sword had already penetrated his heart, through his body, and still flew forward. The Taoist priest's feet did not stop; he still ran at least two 'zhang' forward before finally he fell, dead. The sword was still flying for three more 'zhang' after going through the Taoist priest before it also fell to the ground. The blade flickered under the bright sunlight as the sword stuck straight up in the sand. Although it was only an object without a life or a mind of its own, the sword carried an awe-inspiring divine power.

Seeing this hair-raising scene, there was not a single person among the spectators who was not shaken to the core; they were speechless for half a day. When they remembered to turn their heads back, they saw the Taoist priest fighting Yin Liting was shaking and swaying just like a drunk. He threw his pair of sabers to the ground, and hands were grabbing wildly the empty air. Yin Liting simply ignored him; he walked toward the Emei Pai party. He had just walked for several steps when the Taoist priest uttered a stifled grunt and fell with his face upward, and stopped moving altogether. Nobody saw with what technique Yin Liting had struck him.

The Emei Pai disciples were loudly cheering and clapping. Even Mijue Shitai nodded her head before heaving a deep sigh. Perhaps with her sigh she was saying: Wudang Pai had this kind of excellent disciple, my Emei Pai did not have this accomplished disciple. But perhaps she was saying: Xiaofu was unfortunate not to be able to marry this man but fell

under the hands of a Devil Cult lecherous disciple. In Miejue Shitai's mind, Ji Xiaofu was killed by Yang Xiao, it was not her who struck her to death.

The call 'Liu Shishu' [sixth martial (younger) uncle] was already on Zhang Wuji's lips, but he swallowed it back. Among his martial uncles, Yin Liting was the one closest to his father, therefore, he also had always treated him with parental love. When he looked at this sixth uncle, whom he had not seen for nine years, he saw a face battered with wind and dust, the hair on his temples was graying out. Zhang Wuji presumed Ji Xiaofu's death had given him a tremendous blow.

As he saw a close relative after a long period of separation, Zhang Wuji's first urge was to rush forward and greet him, but finally he thought that in front of too many people, he could not blurt out the truth and should avoid provoking endless trouble later on. Although Zhou Zhiruo knew his real identity, he did not think she would reveal it to others.

Yin Liting bowed and saluted Miejue Shitai. "My humble Sect's Da Shixiong [first martial brother], leading a number of his martial brothers and the third generation disciples, thirty-two people altogether, have arrived at the frontline's canyon bank. Wanbei [younger generation - referring to self] is under Da Shixiong's order to welcome your honorable Sect," he said.

"Good," Miejue Shitai replied, "Wudang has arrived first. Have you had any contact with the demons?"

"We have battled the Devil Cult's Wood and Fire, two Flags, three times," Yin Liting said, "We have killed several demons, but Qi Shidi [seventh martial (younger) brother] Mo Shenggu suffers a light wound."

Miejue Shitai nodded. She knew that although Yin Liting spoke lightly, these three battles must be exceptionally fierce and heavy, such that with Wudang's five heroes' ability, they still failed to kill the Devil Cult's Flag Leaders and the Seventh Hero Mo Shenggu even sustained injury.

"Has your honorable Sect ascertained the strength of the Brightness Peak yet?" Miejue Shitai asked further.

Yin Liting said, "We heard the Heavenly Eagle Cult and other Devil Cult's branches carried a massive operation to support the Brightness Peak, yet some others say that Zi Shan Long Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang have also arrived."

Miejue Shitai was startled. "Zi Shan Long Wang has also arrived?" she asked.

The two of them were talking while walking side by side, with the Emei disciples followed from a distance; they did not dare to listen to these two people's discussion. After talking for a while, Yin Liting raised his cupped fists to take his leave, as he needed to make contact with the Huashan Pai.

"Yin Liuxia," Jing Xuan called out, "You have been busy running around; you must be hungry. Would you eat some light refreshments before continuing your journey?"

Yin Liting was not shy, he said, "In that case I will bother you."

The Emei heroines immediately took out the provisions; some piled sand and built fire to cook noodles in an iron pot. Their meals were simple, but they were very attentive in entertaining Yin Liting; naturally it was for the deceased Ji

Xiaofu's sake. Yin Liting understood their intention; with moist eyes and choking voice he said, "Many thanks to you all, Shijie, Shimei."

Zhu'er had been waiting silently on the side, right now she suddenly said, "Yin Liuxia, may I inquire of you about somebody?"

With a bowl of noodle in his hand, Yin Liting turned his head around and said, "I wonder what the honored name of this Xiao Shimei is [little martial (younger) sister? And who is it you wish to inquire about? If I have the information, I will certainly share it with you." His manner was very cordial.

"I don't belong to the Emei Pai," Zhu'er said, "I am their prisoner."

At first Yin Liting thought she was Emei Pai's young disciple; hearing her said so, he could not help but be a bit surprised. But thinking that the girl was very frank, he asked pointedly, "Are you of the Devil Cult?"

"No," Zhu'er said, "I am a Devil Cult's enemy."

Yin Liting did not have time to ask her origin in details; to respect the host, he cast a questioning look at Jing Xuan.

Jing Xuan said, "What is it that you want to inquire of Yin Liuxia?"

Zhu'er said, "I want to inquire: is your honorable Shixiong, Zhang Cuishan, Zhang Wuxia [fifth hero Zhang] also come to the frontline's canyon bank?"

As soon as they heard this question, Yin Liting and Zhang Wuji were gob-smacked. "What do you want by inquiring

about my Wu Shige?” Yin Liting asked.

With a blushing face Zhu'er replied in a low voice, “I only want to know if his son, Zhang Wuji, also came with him.”

Zhang Wuji was even more startled. “She knows my real identity,” he thought, “and is going to expose it to everybody.”

“Are you telling the truth?” Yin Liting asked.

“I am sincerely inquiring of the Yin Liuxia,” Zhu'er said, “How could I dare to deceive you?”

“My Wu Shige has passed away more than ten years ago,” Yin Liting said, “The tree by his grave has arched over it. Could it be that Miss does not know it?”

Zhu'er sprang up with a start. “Ah,” she exclaimed, “Turns out Zhang Wuxia has already passed away. So ... he ... he has become an orphan early on.”

“Does Miss know my nephew Wuji?” Yin Liting asked.

Zhu'er said, “Five years ago, I met him once at the Butterfly Valley's Divine Doctor Hu Qingniu's house. I don't know where he is right now.”

Yin Liting said, “Receiving my Master's instruction, I also went to the Butterfly Valley to find him, but Hu Qingniu, husband and wife had been killed, while Wuji disappeared without a trace. Afterwards, I went around seeking him, without finding any information about him. Ay, who would have thought ... who would have thought ...” Speaking to this point, his expression turned sad, and he did not continue.

“What?” Zhu’er hastily said, “What bad news did you hear?”

Yin Liting stared at her. “Why are you so concerned about him, Miss?” he asked, “That nephew of mine, Wuji, did he have kindness with you, or enmity?”

Zhu’er turned her gaze to a distant place; she quietly said, “I wanted him to come with me to the Lingshe Island [spirit snake] ...”

“Lingshe Island?” Yin Liting cut her off, “What relation do you have with Jin Hua Popo [Golden Flower Granny] and Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf]?”

Zhu’er did not answer, she continued as if she was talking to herself, “... not only he was not willing, he hit me, scolded me, and bit my palm bloody ...” Her left hand gently stroke the back of her right hand, “... but ... but ... I am still thinking about him. I did not want to harm him, I wanted him to come to the Lingshe Island. Popo would teach him a martial art skill with which he could be healed of the cold poison of the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang [black/mysterious and dark/deep divine palm] in his body. Who would have thought that he was so vicious; he regarded other’s good intentions as bad ones.”

Zhang Wuji’s mind was in turmoil; it was the first time he knew: “Turns out Zhu’er is Ah Li who grabbed me in the Butterfly Valley. The boyfriend who is always in her mind is me.” Casting a sidelong glance, he saw her bumpy cheeks. Where did the beauty he saw on her face when they first met? But her eyes were like limpid autumn water; clear, pure and bright, just like he remembered it after all those years.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, “I hear her Shifu, Jin Hua Popo, also

have some enmity with the Devil Cult. But Jin Hua Popo is certainly not an upright person, and this is not a good time for us to start a feud with her. For now, let's just detain her."

"Hm, so that's how it is," Yin Liting said, "Miss, you had good intentions toward my nephew Wuji, it's a pity that he was so unfortunate. I came across Wu Zhuangzhu [village/manor master] Wu Lie of the Zhu and Wu combined manor recently. I learned that more than five years ago, Wuji lost his footings and fell into a ten-thousand 'zhang' deep ravine; his body and bones did not survive. Ay, the love between his father and I was like hand and foot; who would have thought that the Emperor of Heaven did not bless a well-doer, such that even his only flesh and blood ..." He had not finished speaking when with a thud Zhu'er fell backward as she lost consciousness.

Zhou Zhiruo quickly propped her up and massaged her chest for quite a while before Zhu'er regained consciousness. Zhang Wuji was extremely grieved seeing Yin Liting and Zhu'er heart-broken like this, yet he steeled himself to stay out of this matter. When he looked up, he saw that Zhou Zhiruo was staring at him with a questioning look, apparently she was wondering, "How come she does not recognize you?" Zhang Wuji realized that over the last several years, his stature and appearance had undergone huge changes. Zhou Zhiruo would not recognize him as well if he did not mention the Hanshui River boat affair first.

Biting her lips, Zhu'er asked, "Yin Liuxia, who harmed Zhang Wuji?"

"Nobody did," Yin Liting answered, "Wu Lie of the Zhu and Wu combined manor said that he personally witness Wuji lost his footing on his own and fell into the ravine. Wu Lie's sworn brother, 'One Pen Shaking the Heavens' Zhu

Changling also fell and died together with him." Zhu'er heaved a deep sigh and sat back down dejectedly.

"Miss, what is your honorable surname and great given name?" Yin Liting asked.

Zhu'er only shook her head in daze, as tears streaming down her face. Suddenly she threw herself on the sandy ground and cried miserably.

"Don't be sad, Miss," Yin Liting consoled her, "Even if my nephew Wuji had not fallen into that snowy canyon, the cold poison in his body would have flared up by now, it would still be difficult for him to escape calamity. Ay, he fell with a smashed body and shattered bones, that might not necessarily a bad fortune. It sure beats the heavy and endless torture of the cold poison in his body."

Miejue Shitai suddenly said, "It was better for this breed of sin Zhang Wuji to die early; otherwise he would just be a source of harm to mankind."

Zhu'er was angry. "Old Thief Nun," she roared, "What nonsense are you blabbering about?"

Hearing her unexpectedly dared to insult their venerated master, four or five the Emei disciples immediately drew their swords and pointed the tips to her back.

Zhu'er was not scared at all; she still shouted curses, "Old Thief Nun, Zhang Wuji's father was this Yin Liuxia's Shixiong [martial brother]; his chivalry and prestige spread all over the world. What's not good about him?"

Miejue Shitai laughed coldly without answering. Jing Xuan said, "Watch what you are saying. Zhang Wuji's father was

no doubt a disciple of an upright and prestigious school, but what about his mother? He was the son of a Devil Cult witch. If he was not a breed of sin, the source of harm to the mankind, then what is he?"

"Who was Zhang Wuji's mother?" Zhu'er asked, "Why did you say she was a Devil Cult witch?"

The Emei disciples broke into raucous laughter; only Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head and looked at the ground. Yin Liting looked quite awkward. Zhang Wuji's face was flushed with fury, his eyes red and brimming with tears; if he had not made up his mind to hide his true identity, he would have stood up and defended his mother.

Jing Xu was more honest and considerate; she explained to Zhu'er, "Zhang Wuxia's wife was Heavenly Devil Cult's Cult Leader, Yin Tianzheng's daughter; her name was Yin Susu ..."

"Ah," Zhu'er exclaimed; her countenance changed greatly.

Jing Xu added, "Because Zhang Wuxia took this witch as his wife, he brought ruin and shame upon himself and slashed his own throat on Mount Wudang. This matter was widely known all over the world. Could it be that Miss was not aware?"

"I ... I lived on the Lingshe Island, and have never heard anything about the Wulin world affairs of the Central Plains," Zhu'er said.

"Alright, then," Jing Xuan said, "You have offended my Shifu. Quickly apologize."

But Zhu'er still asked, "That Yin Susu, where is she?"

"She died together with Zhang Wuxia," Jing Xu replied.

Zhu'er's body trembled. "She ... she also died?" she asked.

"Do you know Yin Susu?" Jing Xuan wondered.

Right this moment they saw on the northeast horizon a blue flame shot up to the sky. "Aiyo!" Yin Liting said, "My nephew Qingshu is surrounded by the enemy." Turning around, he bowed to take his leave from Mijue Shitai then raised his cupped fists to everybody else and immediately dashed towards the direction of the blue flame.

Jing Xuan waved her hand; Emei disciples immediately followed. When they got near, they saw that three men were besieging a young man. The three men were wearing hats and dressed like servants, each one had a saber in his hand. The people only watched the fight for several stances and they were secretly shocked. Although these three men were dressed like servants, their movements were ruthless and fierce, not at all inferior to top ranking martial artists. It seemed like their martial art skills were a lot stronger than the three Taoist priests killed by Yin Liting. They were attacking the young man dressed in scholar attire in rotation; one by one they took turns in engaging the young scholar in close combat. The scholar had fallen into a greatly disadvantageous situation, but the sword in his hand still formed a tight defense.

By these four fiercely fighting men stood six men wearing yellow robes, their robes were embroidered with red blazing flame; obviously they were Devil Cult people. These six men stood out of the way and did not take part in the battle. As soon as they saw Yin Liting and the Emei disciples arrive, a stout man among the six called out, "Yin Jia Xiongdi [brothers of the Yin family], you have failed. Just run with

your tails between your legs, Laozi [old man or 'your father' (vulgar term), referring to self] will cover your back."

One of the men in servant attire angrily said, "Hou Tu [thick earth] Flag crawls the slowest. The one surnamed Yan, why don't you run away first?"

Jing Xuan coldly said, "Death is knocking on your door, and you are still squabbling among yourselves?"

"Shijie," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Who are those people?"

"Those wearing the servant attire are Yin Tianzheng's servants," Jing Xuan replied, "They are called Yin Wufu [without luck/prosperity], Yin Wulu [without good fortune], and Yin Wushou [without long life]."

Zhou Zhiruo was astonished. "Three servants, and yet they are this ... this good?" she asked.

"Originally they were famous big robbers of the underworld; they are not ordinary people at all," Jing Xuan replied, "Those in yellow robes are the Hou Tu Flag demons of the Devil Cult. Perhaps the stout one is Yan Yuan, the Flag Leader of the Hou Tu Flag. Shifu said that the five flag leaders of the Devil Cult clashed with the Heavenly Devil Cult over the Jiaozhu position; they don't get along with each other ..."

By this time the young scholar had repeatedly fallen into dangerous situations. With a 'Rip!' his left sleeve was cut by the saber in Yin Wushou's hand. Yin Liting let out a clear whistle, his sword went straight to Yin Wulu. Yin Wulu swept his saber horizontally across his chest to block. The saber and the sword collided. By this time, Yin Liting had already possessed abundant internal energy; it was not a small matter at all. 'Slap!' Yin Wulu's saber was shaken and bent,

it turned into a square tool.

Yin Wulu was shocked; he leaped three steps sideways. Suddenly Zhu'er leaped toward him, her right index finger stretched out and pierced the back of Yin Wulu's neck, and then she leaped back to her previous position at once. Yin Wulu's martial art skill was not superficial at all, but under Yin Liting's internal energy attack, the 'chi' and blood in his chest welled up. While he was still staggering, Zhu'er's finger pierced him. Immediately he doubled up in pain and only managed to let out a soft grunt while his body shivered incessantly.

Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou were shocked; abandoning their fight with the young scholar, they rushed toward Yin Wulu to support him. They saw his body was twisted; obviously his injury was very heavy. They turned their gaze toward Zhu'er and suddenly exclaimed, "It is San Xiaojie [third miss]."

"Humph," Zhu'er snorted, "You still recognize me?"

Everybody thought that these two men would certainly stake everything they got to fight Zhu'er; who would have thought that they picked Yin Wulu and without saying anything they rushed to the north.

This turn of events happened so suddenly that everybody was dumbstruck; they scratched their heads in confusion.

The stout man in yellow robe raised his left hand, in which there was a yellow flag. The other five men also waved their yellow flags. Although there were only six of them, the flags made noise just like a boar hunting party. They slowly retreated to the north with an imposing manner.

Seeing the strange flags, Emei disciples were taken aback.

Two male disciples shouted and pursued. Yin Liting's shadow swayed as he ran after them. He overtook them and cut their path. With arms straight to the front, he lightly pushed. The two men could not help but were pushed three steps back. Their faces immediately turned red.

Jing Xuan shouted, "Shidi [martial brothers], come back! Yin Liuxia's intention is good. This Hou Tu Flag must not be pursued."

Yin Liting said, "The day before yesterday Mo Qidi [seventh (younger) brother] and I chased the Lie Huo [raging inferno] Flag formation, and had to suffer a big defeat. Half of Mo Qidi's hair and eyebrows were burned." While saying that, he pulled his left sleeve up, showing a large red patch of burned skin. The two Emei male disciples could not help from feeling inwardly scared.

Miejue Shitai's cold and penetrating eyes swept Zhu'er's face. "Was that 'qian zhu wan du shou'?" she coldly asked.

"Not perfect yet," Zhu'er replied.

"What could you have done if it were perfect?" Miejue Shitai asked, "Why did you harm that man?"

"Too bad I couldn't pierce him to death on the spot," Zhu'er said.

"Why?" Miejue Shitai asked.

"It's my business," Zhu'er replied, "Why do you care?"

Miejue Shitai's body slightly moved to the side; she took the sword from Jing Xuan's hand. 'Ding!' Zhu'er busily leaped backward; her face turned paper white. Turned out in that

split second Mijue Shitai had chopped her right hand index finger. Her hand was so swift that nobody was able to see it clearly. Because her broken wrist had not completely healed, Zhu'er's hand was still weak; moreover, because her 'qian zhu wan du shou' had not been perfected yet, Zhu'er had put a refined steel cap on her finger before she made her move. Besides, the sword Mijue Shitai used was not Yitian Sword; therefore, to everybody's surprise, this sword unexpectedly failed to cut her finger.

Mijue Shitai tossed the sword back to Jing Xuan. "Humph," she snorted and said, "I'll let you go this time. Next time you use this kind of malicious martial art, make sure you don't fall into my hand." Since her attack to a junior did not hit its target, true to her higher status, she was not willing to make another move.

Yin Liting saw the vicious and malicious the martial art Zhu'er practiced, which was his school's big taboo. However, she had pierced Yin Wulu in her attempt to help his side; furthermore, he also saw her concern toward Zhang Wuji and how passionately she was devoted to him. In the end, he felt compassionate toward Zhu'er and did not want Mijue Shitai to injure her.

"Shishu [martial (younger) uncle]," he persuaded Mijue Shitai, "This child has learned the wrong kind of skill, we can slowly help her to learn from another great master. Hmm ... perhaps ... perhaps ..." He was thinking that it would be best if Mijue Shitai was willing to accept her as an Emei disciple; but he remembered how this young girl had just called her 'old thief nun'. Fortunately, he managed to stop in time and did not continue speaking. Beckoning to the young scholar to come over, he said, "Qingshu, quickly pay your respects to Shitai and to all Shibo and Shishu."

The scholar hurriedly took three steps forward and knelt in front of Mijue Shitai. When he bowed to Jing Xuan, everybody continually called out 'Do not dare' and all of them returned his salute. Zhang Sanfeng's age was close to a hundred years; in terms of seniority, he was actually more than one generation above Mijue Shitai. But because Yin Liting was engaged to Ji Xiaofu, he was considered one generation younger than Mijue Shitai. Supposing Zhang Sanfeng was considered of the same generation with the Emei Pai founder Guo Xiang then technically Mijue Shitai should call Yin Liting 'Shishu'. Fortunately, Wudang and Emei were two distinct schools and neither one considered the seniority of the other school as important, so they address each other based on their age, regardless of the generational seniority. Therefore, when the young scholar called them as 'Shibo' and 'Shishu' [martial uncles], Jing Xuan and the others modestly declined.

Everybody had just witnessed his battle against the three Yin brothers; his movements were deliberate, his techniques were refined and wonderful, clearly he was a disciple of a prestigious school. Furthermore, although he was at a disadvantage under the three martial art masters' attack, he still maintained his calm in resisting the enemy; he did not the least bit look panicked, which was not easy to do. Now that they met face to face, everybody could not help but secretly admire him. "What a handsome young man!" they thought. They could see that in his delicately handsome appearance, there was a third part of proud and imposing bearing, causing those who saw him to be impressed.

"This is my Da Shige's only son," Yin Liting said, "His name is Qingshu."

Jing Xuan said, "For the last several years, the name and chivalrous deeds of Yu Mian Meng Chang [Jade-faced Meng

Chang – emperor of the Later Shu kingdom, known for his aptitude in ruling the kingdom] is quite famous; the Jianghu people say that Song Shaoxia [young hero Song] is generous and vehement in upholding justice, always ready to deliver people from their distress. It is very fortunate to meet a revered model.” The crowd of Emei disciples murmured among themselves with the ‘he really lives up to his reputation’ look of admiration on their faces.

Zhu’er stood close to Zhang Wuji. “Ahniue Ge,” she said in low voice, “This man is a lot more handsome than you are.”

“Of course,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Do you need to mention it?”

“Are you jealous?” Zhu’er asked.

“Are you joking?” Zhang Wuji replied, “Why should I?”

“He is looking at your Miss Zhou,” Zhu’er said, “You are still not jealous?”

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to Song Qingshu, and sure enough, Song Qingshu was looking at Zhou Zhiruo; but Zhang Wuji did not care. After finding out that Zhu'er was indeed Ah Li whom he met at the Butterfly Valley that year, his heart was tumultuous. At that time Zhu'er was forcing him to come with her to the Lingshe Island, he had no choice but fiercely bite her hand because he could not free himself otherwise. Unexpectedly, she had never forgotten him all this time. He could not help but feeling very grateful.

"Qingshu," he heard Yin Liting said, "Let's go."

Song Qingshu said, "Kongtong Pai has made an appointment to meet with us in this area by noon today, but they have

not arrived yet until now; I am afraid they have met some set-back."

Yin Liting looked worried. "I am afraid so," he said.

"Yin Liushu," Song Qingshu said, "I think it is better for us to travel together with the Emei Pai seniors to the west."

"Very well," Yin Liting nodded.

Miejue Shitai and Jing Xuan and the rest all thought, "For the last several years, Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren no longer deals with day-to-day business, Song Yuanqiao is the acting Zhang Men [sect leader] of Wudang. It looks like the third generation Zhang Men position will fall into this Song Shaoxia's hand. Although Yin Liting is his Shishu, he heeds his advice."

Actually, they did not know that Yin Liting was always easy-going; not often would he pull his rank on others, he very seldom opposed whatever other people suggested.

After travelling for about forty, fifty 'li', they saw a tall sand dune ahead of them. Seeing Song Qingshu quickly climb the sand dune, Jing Xuan waved her left hand and two Emei disciples quickly followed. They did not want to be outdone by the Wudang Pai. As the three of them climbed over the sand dune, they cried out in alarm, because to the west of the sand dune there were about thirty bodies scattered on the sand.

Hearing the cry, everybody rushed to climb the sand dune. They noticed that all the corpses, young and old alike, if their skulls were not shattered, then their chests were smashed in; apparently they were all struck by a large blunt object.

Yin Liting had a vast experience; he said, “The Poyang [name of a city/county] Clan of Jiangxi has been wiped out by the Ju Mu [Gigantic Wood] Flag of the Devil Cult.”

Miejue Shitai frowned. “Why did the Poyang Clan come over here?” she asked, “Did your honorable Pai invite them?” She did not sound too happy. The prestigious schools of the Wulin world had always been discriminatory against the clans and societies [‘bang’ and ‘hui’]; Miejue Shitai did not want to mingle with them.

Yin Liting busily said, “We did not. But Poyang Clan’s Liu Bangzhu [Clan Leader] is a disciple of Kongtong Pai. They must have heard the Six Major Sects are besieging the Brightness Peak, and then volunteered to come and help their school.

“Humph,” Miejue Shitai snorted; no longer saying anything.

The disciples buried the bodies of the Poyang Clan people in the sand. They were about to continue their journey when suddenly the grave farthest to the west split open; from beneath the sand flew a person, who grabbed a male disciple and ran away. The rest of the people were so frightened that they were at a loss; about seven, eight Emei female disciples screamed. But they saw that Miejue Shitai, Yin Liting, Song Qingshu and Jing Xuan had already run after that person.

A short moment later everyone came to their senses; they realized now that the person jumping out of the grave must be Qing Yi Fu Wang of the Devil Cult. He must have put on Poyang Clan’s uniform, mixed himself among the corpses and stopped his breathing, pretended to be dead. The Emei disciples did not look carefully and had buried him in the

sand. His skill was strong, and he had a lot of guts; so he did not immediately make his presence known. Luckily the sand was loose, so he had no problem holding his breath for a while. When he felt he had fooled them enough, he suddenly broke out of the grave.

At first, Mijue Shitai and the other, four people, were running abreast; but after making a large half circle, the difference in their skill levels became apparent. Two people were now running ahead of the other two; Yin Liting and Mijue Shitai in the front, Song Qingshu and Jing Xuan on the rear. But Qing Yi Fu Wang's 'qing gong' was very strong; truly unparalleled in the world; even when he was carrying a man in his arms, how could Yin Liting and the others overtake him?

When they were about to circle the second time, Song Qingshu suddenly stopped and called out, "Zhao Lingzhu Shishu, Bei Jinyi Shishu, please outflank him from position 'li' [lit. leave/depart]; Ding Minjun Shishu, Li Mingxia Shishu, please cut him off from position 'zhen' [lit. shake/jolt; my dictionary also gives: symbolizing thunder in 'ba gua'] ..." He continuously shouted his order, instructing the more than thirty Emei disciples to occupy various positions according to Ba Gua [trigrams].

At that moment, the Emei people were like a dragon without a head; hearing the instructions he shouted with authority, everybody complied immediately. This way, Qing Yi Fu Wang was not able to circle freely; with a shrill laughter he tossed the man he had been carrying high to the sky, and then he sped away.

Mijue Shitai put out her hands to receive the disciple falling down, while Wei Yixiao's voice came across the sandy desert from afar, "Unexpectedly Emei Pai has this kind of skilled

man; Miejue Lao Ni [old nun] is truly amazing!" It was obvious that he was praising Song Qingshu.

When Miejue Shitai lowered her head to look at the disciple in her hands, she saw his throat was dripping with blood with two rows of teeth marks; he was definitely dead. Everybody stood around her; they were grieved beyond words.

After a long time, Yin Liting spoke up, "According to what I heard, each time this Qing Yi Fu Wang has to use his martial art, he has to suck fresh blood from a live human being. It looks like the rumor is not false. It's too bad for this Shidi [martial (younger) brother] ... ay ..."

Miejue Shitai was ashamed and furious at the same time. Ever since she assumed the Sect Leader position, Emei Pai had never received this kind of significant setback; two of her disciples died in succession, their blood being sucked by the enemy, yet she could not even see the enemy's appearance clearly.

After staring blankly for half a day, she turned her piercing gaze toward Song Qingshu and asked, "How do you know these many names of my disciples?"

"Jing Xuan Shishu introduced numerous Shishu to disciple," Song Qingshu replied.

"Hey, photographic memory! [orig. 'ru er bu wang' - enter the ears won't forget]" Miejue Shitai exclaimed, "Of course my Emei Pai does not have this kind of talent."

When they stopped for the night that evening, Song Qingshu respectfully came to Miejue Shitai. He bowed and said, "Qianbei [senior, older generation], 'wanbei' [junior,

younger generation] has a presumptuous request to ask."

"If you know it is presumptuous, why ask?" Miejue Shitai coldly replied.

"Yes," Song Qingshu respectfully replied. He bowed again and returned to sit next to Yin Liting.

Everybody heard he came to Miejue Shitai with a request, but when the request was declined, he did not talk too much; they were all curious: what was it that he wanted to ask? Finally Ding Minjun could not hold her patience.

"Song Xiongdi [brother]," she asked, "What is it that you want to ask my Shifu?"

Song Qingshu replied, "When my father taught 'wanbei' sword technique, he mentioned that among the sword experts of this age, our own school's Shizu [ancestor master] is number one; next to him is Emei Pai Zhang Men Miejue 'qianbei'. Father said, Wudang and Emei swordsmanship each has its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, our school's 'Shou Hui Wu Xian' [hand brandishes five-stringed instrument] is very similar to your honorable Sect's 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan' [light veil, small fan] with minor differences. But if the force on the sword's blade is increased, the move loses its liveliness and agility, unlike the 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan', which can maintain its free and unrestrained character." He was speaking and pulling out his sword at the same time, and then executed those two stances in succession; only when he launched the 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan', his movements were somewhat nondescript.

Ding Minjun laughed and said, "That's not right." Taking the sword from his hand, she demonstrated the stance for him and said, "My wrist is still in pain, I cannot exert my

strength, but the movement should be like that."

Song Qingshu gasped in admiration. He said, "Father always says that he is unfortunate never to see your revered master's swordsmanship. Today 'wanbei' can see Ding Shishu's 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan' stance, it truly is an eye opener for me. Wanbei was thinking of asking Shitai for some pointers to satisfy some doubts and suspicions in my heart. But wanbei is not your honorable Pai's disciple; thereupon I shouldn't have said anything."

Miejue Shitai was sitting some distance away, but she heard everything he said. Hearing that Song Yuanqiao ranked her as number two in the world in terms of swordsmanship, she was satisfied. Zhang Sanfeng was considered the 'tai shan bei dou' [as weighty as Mount Tai, as brilliant as the Big Dipper] in the martial art study of the present age; everybody admired him. She had never had any desire to surpass this grand master who was rarely seen, at present, as well as in the past. For a Wudang main disciple to unexpectedly regard her swordsmanship as the most refined aside from Zhang Sanfeng, she could not help but feel very proud of herself. Seeing Ding Minjun executed the stance with only thirty, forty percent proficiency, she was displeased; how could the Emei Pai sword technique whose prestige had shaken the world was just like this? She stood up and came near immediately; without saying anything she took the sword from Ding Minjun's hand. Lifting the sword so that it was level with her nose, she gently shook the sword that the blade made a buzzing noise. And then she moved the sword from right to left, again from left to right, the sword successively flashed nine times with an extraordinary speed, but each move was very clear. Seeing their master launched this amazing sword technique, the Emei disciple's hearts were pounding and their palms were wet with perspiration.

“Excellent sword technique! Excellent sword technique!” Yin Liting called loudly, “Wonderful!”

Song Qingshu watched with rapt attention while holding his breath; inwardly he was frightened. At first he commended Emei sword technique just to flatter Mijue Shitai; who would have thought that as she executed the technique, it was unimaginably subtle and amazing that he could not help but submit to her wholeheartedly. After that, with all sincerity Song Qingshu asked for advice. Whatever he asked, Mijue Shitai would answer without reservation, so that she passed on more knowledge to him than to her own disciples. Song Qingshu’s mastery of the martial art was already high, he was also intelligent so he asked all the right questions.

Emei disciples sat around these two people. They watched their Shifu fully demonstrate each one of the sword techniques, every single one was exquisite, strange and subtle, amazing to the extreme. There were some disciples who had been with their Shifu for a dozen of years yet had never seen Shifu demonstrate such divine skill.

Zhang Wuji and Zhu’er stood far outside the circle; they felt it was inappropriate for them to watch Emei’s sword technique demonstration without authorization. Suddenly Zhu’er said to Zhang Wuji, “Ahniu Ge, if I can learn ‘qing gong’ like Qing Yi Fu Wang, I will die satisfied.”

“Why would you want to learn that kind of heretical skill?” Zhang Wuji said, “Yin Liu ... Yin Liuxia said that each time this Wei Yixiao utilizes his martial art, he must drink human blood. Isn’t that demonical?”

“His martial art skill is good,” Zhu’er replied, “He managed to kill Emei Pai’s disciples. If his ‘qing gong’ was somewhat

lacking, that Old Nun and her companions would have caught him and killed him; only they would not suck his blood. The end result is the same; sucking blood or not, what's the difference? Upright prestigious school or heretical and demonic way, what's different?"

For a moment Zhang Wuji could not find a right answer. Suddenly he saw a bright flash of a sword flying straight up to the sky from amidst the people. Turned out Song Qingshu was sparring with Miejue Shitai. During the fifth stance, 'hei zhao ling hu' [spirit fox of the black marsh], she shook Song Qingshu's sword to the sky. This stance was created by Emei Pai's founder, Guo Xiang to commemorate her adventure with Yang Guo when they went to the black marsh to catch the spirit fox.

As everybody looked up at the sword, they saw a yellow flame shot to the sky on the northeast, about a dozen 'li' away. "Kongtong Pai meets the enemy," Yin Liting called out, "Let's go and help."

In this far away mission to the western region to besiege the Devil Cult this time, in order to conceal their operation, the Six Major Sects adopted a strategy of entering the enemy territory separately and then launch a converging attack from different directions. They had agreed on rockets in six different colors as their means of communicating with each other. Yellow rocket was Kongtong Pai's signal.

Everybody immediately rushed toward the direction of the flame. They heard loud noises of combat, the sound was getting increasingly wretched; often times they would hear one or two people crying out as they met their deaths. When they reached the place, they were greatly shocked, because what they saw was a large scale massacre, an orgy of bloodshed. Both sides had several hundred people in the

battle. Under the bright moon, the sabers and swords flicker as the combatants ignore death and overlook live in hard fighting.

As long as he lived, Zhang Wuji had never seen this kind of battle. He saw sabers and swords fly and dance in the air, blood spill and flesh cut open; truly it was a scene too horrible to endure. He did not wish for the Devil Cult to prevail, but also unwilling for Yin Liushu and his company to triumph over their opponent. One side was the Sect where his father came from, the other was his mother's; but both sides were in an impossible-to-coexist kind of fierce battle. Each time he saw somebody was killed, his heart was shaken, a burst of grief rose up.

Yin Liting observed the battle for a moment and then said, "The enemy consists of Rui Jin [acute/sharp metal], Hong Shui [flooding water] and Lie Huo [raging inferno], three Flags. Hmm, Kongtong Pai is here, Huashan Pai has also arrived, and so has Kunlun Pai. Our side's three Sects against the enemy's three Flags. Qingshu, let's go into the battle." He waved his sword to split the air, making a buzzing noise.

"Wait," Song Qingshu said, "Liushu, look on that side. There are still a large number of the enemy waiting for an opportunity to make their move."

Following the direction of his hand, Zhang Wuji saw that there were three groups of riders clumped together in neat formation toward the east, several dozen 'zhang' away from the battlefield. Each group had a hundred men. Currently, the three Sects against three Flags on the battlefield were evenly matched, but if these three companies of the Devil Cult entered the battle, Kongtong, Huashan and Kunlun, three Sects would inadvertently suffer a crushing defeat.

However, for an unknown reason, these three companies only held their reins without moving.

Miejue Shitai and Yin Liting were secretly alarmed. "Why don't those people make their move?" Yin Liting asked Song Qingshu.

Song Qingshu shook his head, "I can't think through," he said.

Zhu'er suddenly laughed coldly. "What is it you cannot think through?" she said, "Nothing is clearer than this."

Song Qingshu's face reddened, but he did not say anything. Miejue Shitai wanted to open her mouth to ask, but finally she held her peace. Yin Liting said, "Would Miss please give us directions?"

Zhu'er said, "Those three groups are from the Heavenly Eagle Cult. Although the Heavenly Eagle Cult branched out from the Devil Cult, they have never been in good terms with the Five-Element Flags. If your party managed to wipe out the Five-Element Flags, the Heavenly Eagle Cult will be inwardly joyful. Perhaps Yin Tianzheng then can work his way to the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu position."

Miejue Shitai instantly saw the light. Yin Liting said, "Thank you very much for your insight, Miss."

Miejue Shitai stared at Zhu'er. She nodded her head while thinking, "Jin Hua Popo's martial art skill is not weak. Who could have thought that this young disciple of hers is actually also quite good?"

By this time, the group of Emei disciples arrived one after another; they stood behind Miejue Shitai.

“Song Shaoxia,” Jing Xuan said, “Speaking about battle strategy, none of us could surpass your knowledge. Everybody will obey your command. We just want to kill the enemy. Please don’t be bashful.”

“Liushu, this ... this ...” Song Qingshu stammered, “How can nephew dare?”

“At a time like this you still pay particular attention to superficial politeness?” Miejue Shitai said, “Just issue your order.”

Song Qingshu saw the battle situation was urgent; fighting the Rui Jin Flag, Kunlun Pai seemed to have an upper hand, Huashan and Hong Shui seemed to be evenly matched, while Kongtong Pai seemed not able to hold with the Lie Huo Flag that surrounded them in the middle, slaughtering them left and right.

Song Qingshu said, “Let’s form three groups and charge down on Rui Jin Flag from three directions. Shitai with her team attack from the east, Liushu with his team attack from the west, Jing Xuan Shishu, wanbei and our team attack from the south ...”

Jing Xuan was perplexed. “Kunlun Pai is not in a dire situation at all,” she said, “I think Kongtong Pai’s situation is extremely critical.”

“Kunlun Pai is already holding the upper hand,” Song Qingshu explained, “With our additional great fighting power, we thunder in to kill; we can annihilate the Rui Jin Flag in one stroke. The other two Flags will then be wasted and will scatter into the wind. If we help Kongtong, we will be locked into a harsh battle. The Heavenly Eagle Cult will then reap the benefit just like a fisherman spreading his net.

Our effort will then be wasted."

Jing Xuan was truly won over with admiration. "Song Shaoxia has said it well," she said. She divided her martial brothers and sisters into three groups at once.

Zhu'er pulled Zhang Wuji's sled away. "Let us go," she said, "There is no advantage for us to stay in here." She then turned around and started to move.

Song Qingshu quickly moved to overtake them, he blocked them with his sword across his chest. "Miss, please stop," he called out.

"And why must I?" Zhu'er said.

"Miss' origin is dubious," Song Qingshu said, "I can't let you go this easily."

With a cold laugh Zhuer said, "So what if my origin is dubious? So what if it is not?"

Miejue Shitai's heart was burning with impatience; she could not wait to set aside the Buddhist commandment against taking life immediately and kill the Devil Cult people neat and clean. Listening to Zhu'er and Song Qingshu bickering with each other, her shadow swayed and she had already reached Zhu'er. Her hand quickly sealed three major acupoints on Zhu'er's back, waist and leg. Zhu'er's martial art skill and Miejue Shitai's differed too much; she was completely helpless against this attack. Her knees buckled and she fell down to the ground.

Miejue Shitai brandished her sword and shouted, "We are setting aside the commandment against taking life today; destroy the demons completely!" Along with Yin Liting and Jing Xuan, they charged toward the Rui Jin Flag from three

different directions.

Kunlun Pai disciples, led by He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, had already occupied the dominant position against the Rui Jin Flag. With Emei and Wudang now joining the battle, their power multiplied. Miejue Shitai's swordsmanship was swift and fierce beyond comparison; no one from the Ming Cult was able to hold her for more than three stances. Her big and tall figure was seen weaving through the enemies. Stabbing to the east and hacking to the west, in a very short time seven Ming Cult people lost their lives under her sword.

Realizing the dire circumstances, Zhuang Zheng, the Flag Leader of the Rui Jin Flag rushed to meet the enemy with his wolf-fang staff. Only then was Miejue Shitai's advance slightly obstructed. After exchanging about ten stances, Miejue Shitai unleashed the full power of Emei swordsmanship; her sword was growing faster and stronger. But Zhuang Zheng's martial art skill was highly refined; unexpectedly he was able to match her for a while.

By this time, Yin Liting, Jing Xuan, Song Qingshu, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and their company had done major killing. Although the Rui Jin Flag did not lack highly skilled fighters under its banner, how could they resist the joined forces of Emei, Kunlun and Wudang, three Sects? Before long, the casualties on their side were disastrous.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' Zhuang Zheng struck his staff three times, forcing Miejue Shitai to take a step backward. These three strikes were immediately followed by another one as his staff went down, hard and fast, toward the top of her head. Miejue Shitai's sword moved slightly to the side and knocked the body of the staff, using the stance 'shun shui tui zhou' [push the boat with the current], forcing the wolf-fang staff to the side. To her surprise, as an important

character within the Ming Cult, Zhuang Zheng could be considered a first-class martial art expert in the Wulin world; his natural strength was amazingly powerful, his internal energy cultivation had also reached top level. As he felt an internal energy push on his wolf-fang staff, he shouted loudly and countered it with a brute and fierce force of his arm. 'Crack!' Miejue Shitai's sword broke into three sections.

When her weapon broke, Miejue Shitai's arm went numb, but she did not withdraw. Reaching to her back, she pulled the Yitian Sword. A cold and bright ray of light flashed and sparks flew as with the 'tie suo heng jiang' [iron lock across the river] she thrust the sword forward. Zhuang Zheng suddenly felt the wolf-fang staff in his hands got lighter, as the full-of-teeth head of the staff was cut down by the Yitian Sword, along with half of his own head, which was also truncated by this matchless sharp sword.

Seeing their Flag Leader has lost his life, the Rui Jin Flag people screamed hysterically and with bloodshot eyes they fought even more ruthlessly, completely disregarding their own lives, immediately killing several Kunlun and Emei disciples.

Someone from the Hong Shui Flag shouted, "Zhuang Qishi [Flag Leader Zhuang] has returned to Heaven for the sake of the Cult, Rui Jin and Lie Huo, two Flags to withdraw; Hong Shui Flag to cover our retreat."

The banner of the Lie Huo Flag changed; following the order, they withdrew to the west. But the Rui Jin Flag was fighting even more fiercely, nobody withdrew. The man from the Hong Shui Flag shouted again, "Tang Qishi [Flag Leader Tang] of Hong Shui Flag gives his order: the situation is unfavorable, Rui Jin Flag people to withdraw immediately. We will avenge Zhuang Qishi on a later date."

Several people from the Rui Jin Flag shouted together, "Hong Shui Flag, please withdraw, avenge our grievance in the future. Rui Jin Flag brethrens will live and die together with Zhuang Qishi."

The Hong Shui Flag suddenly raised a black banner. Someone with a thunderous voice called out, "Brothers of the Rui Jin Flag, the Hong Shui Flag will definitely avenge you."

The Rui Jin Flag only had about seventy men left; all in one voice called out, "Many thanks Tang Qishi!"

The Hong Shui Flag's banner turned over and they also withdrew to the west.

Seeing the orderliness of the enemy lineup, with about twenty people on the rear held some glittering cylinders, The people of Huashan and Kongtong, two schools did not dare to pursue they didn't know what kind of strange trick these contraptions were. Everybody turned their attention on the attack on the Rui Jin Flag.

By this time the battle outcome had been decided; Kunlun, Emei, Wudang, Huashan and Kongtong, five Sects surrounded the Ming Cult's Rui Jin Flag. Other than Wudang, which had only two people present, the other four Sects' people were all elite fighters. Since the Flag Leader was dead, the Rui Jin Flag was like a dragon without a head; naturally they were not a match of these martial art experts. But the people serving under the banner were very loyal, they all view death as a return home, and were determined to follow Zhuang Zheng in dying for the sake of the Cult.

After killing several more people, Yin Liting felt their victory

was inappropriate. In a loud voice he shouted, "Devil Cult demons, listen up: You have only one way out of the death's door. Throw your weapons at once, we will spare your lives."

The Vice Flag Leader laughed aloud and said, "You disregard our Ming Cult's people too much! Since Zhuang Dage [big brother] has died, would we wish to live?"

Yin Liting called out, "Friends of Kunlun, Emei, Huashan and Kongtong, everybody take ten steps back, let these demons surrender." One after another, everybody retreated.

Out of her hatred toward the Devil Cult, Miejue Shitai did not retreat, but brandished her sword wildly. Wherever the blade of the Yitian Sword reached, swords broke and sabers cut, limbs severed and heads flew. Seeing that their master did not withdraw, the Emei Pai disciples charged back into the battleground to join the slaughter. Now it was Emei Pai one sect against the Rui Jin Flag.

The Rui Jin Flag still had approximately sixty people, among which, around twenty men were martial art experts. Under the leadership of the Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao, they outnumbered the thirty some Emei disciples by two to one. Technically, they should gain the upper hand. However, the Yitian Sword in Miejue Shitai's hand was simply too sharp, her sword stances were also very fierce and swift; her dark green shadow appeared to be everywhere, sweeping everything in her path. Instantly seven, eight more people lost their lives under her sword.

Zhang Wuji could not bear to watch. "Let us go," he said to Zhu'er. Reaching out, he unsealed her acupoints. Who would have thought that after massaging her back and waist for awhile, Zhu'er still felt numb and aching because her acupoints were still sealed. Only then did they realize the

profoundness of Mijue Shitai's internal energy. She only touched lightly, yet her strength penetrated deep into the blood passages. Although Zhang Wuji possessed enough strength and knowledge to unseal the acupoints, he could not do that in such a short period of time.

Zhang Wuji sighed. When he turned his head, he saw all the weapons of the dozens of Rui Jin Flag people were broken. In one hand, these people were surrounded by the Kunlun, Huashan and Kongtong disciples, on the other hand, they were unwilling to run away; thereupon they fought Emei disciples with their bare hands.

Although Mijue Shitai abhorred the Devil Cult, with her status as the Sect Leader of a major sect, she did not want to use a weapon to massacre unarmed enemies. With an outstretched left hand finger, she floated everywhere like a passing cloud or flowing water. In a short moment, the various acupoints of fifty plus Rui Jin Flag people were sealed. They stood upright on the spot, unable to move at all.

Witnessing Mijue Shitai's superior skill like this, the spectators all cheered. It was now daybreak. Suddenly they realized that the Heavenly Eagle Cult's three groups of riders slowly closing in from the east, south and north directions. The riders stopped when they were about several dozen of 'zhang' away from these people. Apparently they assumed a wait-and-see attitude from some distance away and did not wish to challenge the enemy right away.

"Ahniu Ge," Zhu'er said, "Let's leave quickly. It would be a lot worse if we fall into the hands of the Heavenly Eagle Cult."

Zhang Wuji had an inexplicable affection toward the

Heavenly Eagle Cult in his heart. It was his mother's sect. When he thought about his mother, oftentimes he also thought, "Mother has died, I can't see her anymore; I wonder if I can see Waigong [maternal grandfather] and Jiujiu [maternal uncle]?" Now that the Heavenly Eagle Cult people were nearby, he wondered if his grandfather or his uncle was among them; therefore, he did not want to leave too soon.

Song Qingshu stepped forward to talk to Miejue Shitai. "Qianbei, we'd better execute the Rui Jin Flag before dealing with the Heavenly Eagle Cult, so that we will have one less thing to worry." Miejue Shitai nodded.

The early morning sun slowly rose from the east. Its hazy ray shone on Miejue Shitai's big and tall figure, leaving a long shadow on the ground. Within the imposing image she projected, there was a cold and lonely, yet frightening emotion. In her desire to break the Devil Cult's spirit, she did not want to kill them with a sword just like that.

In a stern voice she said, "Devil Cult people, listen up: whoever wants to live only needs to beg for mercy, then you'll be free to go."

Her words were met with silence. After half a day, a series of incessant ha-ha, hey-hey, hee-hee laughter was heard; the Ming Cult people broke out in laughter, the sound was loud and clear.

"What's so funny?" Miejue Shitai indignantly asked.

In a loud and clear voice the Rui Jin Flag's Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao responded, "We have made an oath to live and die together with Zhuang Dage. Just kill us quickly."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, "Very well! You still want to be heroes and warriors in a time like this! You wish for a

quick and painless death? Not that easy!" Her sword vibrated lightly and immediately cut Wu Jingcao's right arm.

Wu Jingcao laughed out loud, his expression remained calm and composed. "The Ming Cult enforces justice on behalf of Heaven, provides relief to the people, there is no difference between life and death. Old Thief Nun wants us to kneel down and surrender, I suggest you get rid of that desire at the earliest opportunity."

Miejue Shitai was even more furious. 'Shua! Shua! Shua!' three times, she chopped the next three Cult disciples' arms. To the fifth man she asked, "Are you going to beg for mercy?"

"Eat your own stinky old nun dog fart!" the man cursed.

Jing Xuan stepped forward from the side and chopped that man's arm with her sword, while calling out, "Let disciple chop these demons!" She asked several men in succession, but none of the Ming Cult people was willing to surrender. Jing Xuan chopped until her hand grew tired.

"Shifu," she turned her head around, "These demons are so stubborn ..." Her intention was to ask for leniency from her master.

Miejue Shitai ignored her completely. "Chop everybody's right arm first," she said, "If they are still stubborn, chop their left arms!" Jing Xuan had no choice but chop several more people's arms.

Zhang Wuji was not able to keep patient much longer; he sprang up from the snow sled and stood in front of Jing Xuan. "Stop!" he called out. Jing Xuan was startled; she took a step backward.

In a loud voice Zhang Wuji said, "Such a cold-blooded cruelty, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Everybody was astonished to see a young man with tattered clothes and unsightly appearance suddenly stepping forward boldly. And then they heard his stern but logical question to Jing Xuan, who was a famous senior master of a famous Sect, they could not help but feel intimidated by his imposing manner.

Jing Xuan let out a long laugh and said, "The demons of the heretic way deserve to be killed. What cruelty are you talking about?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Each one of these men upholds brotherhood and loyalty above everything else, they are not afraid of death, those are the qualities of real heroes and warriors; why do you call them demons of the heretic way?"

"Aren't they Devil Cult's disciples?" Jing Xuan retorted, "Isn't that of the heretical way? That Qing Yi Fu Wang sucks human blood, he killed my Shimei and Shidi. You saw it with your own eyes. If that is not demonic, then what do you call it?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "That Qing Yi Fu Wang killed two people, you have killed ten times more people. He used his teeth to kill, Zun Shi [revered master] used Yitian Sword to kill. They both killed people. What difference there is in good or evil way?"

Jing Xuan was furious. "Young fellow!" she shouted, "You actually dare to equate my Shifu with the heretic demon?" 'Whoosh!' her palm struck toward Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji hastily moved sideways to evade.

Jing Xuan was the most senior disciple of the Emei Pai, her martial art skill was taught directly by her master. This strike to his face was a fake one; as soon as Zhang Wuji moved sideways, her left leg flew out toward the pit of his stomach. 'Bang! Crack!' Jing Xuan's left leg broke and she was thrown away several 'zhang' backwards.

Turned out as soon as Zhang Wuji's chest was kicked, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [the divine energy from Nine Yang] inside his body automatically reacted against the incoming force. His footwork was far inferior to Jing Xuan's, but the Jiu Yang Shen Gong was very powerful; the stronger the incoming force, the heavier the reaction force would be. Jing Xuan felt as if her kick was hitting her own body. Luckily she did not have any desire to take his life; this kick only contained about 50% of her strength, so that she did not suffer serious internal injury.

"I am really sorry," Zhang Wuji apologetically said. He rushed forward to help her up.

"Go away! Go away!" Jing Xuan angrily said.

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji replied. He had no choice but to back off. Two of Emei female disciples quickly came over to helped their First Martial Sister up.

Most of everyone watching knew Jing Xuan was the first or at least the second best martial art expert under Miejue Shitai. They were wondering why she was this useless; she was thrown several 'zhang' away by this raggedy youngster just in one stance? If they say that she had enjoyed false reputation, it did not seem so, because when battling the Rui Jin Flag just now, her swordsmanship was superb; indeed everybody had seen it. Could it be that they had misjudged

this raggedy and filthy young man that he actually had a peerless martial art skill?

Miejue Shitai also was secretly amazed. “Which school does this young man belong to?” she mused, “He has been my prisoner for many days, yet I have not paid attention to him. Turned out he is a master who did not show his true colors; he is actually a great character who did not boast his greatness. Even if I want to shake Jing Xuan like this, I am afraid I cannot; perhaps in this age only that old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng who has this kind of ability. But then he had to train for a hundred years before reaching this level.”

Miejue Shitai’s character was like ginger; the older she got, the spicier she became. Although she did not dare to belittle Zhang Wuji, actually she also did not have the least bit of fear in her heart. She looked at him from top to bottom to size him up.

At this time Zhang Wuji was already busy taking care of the Rui Jin Flag people’s bloody wounds. With top-ranked proficiency his hands sealed various acupoints on everyone so that the blood flowing from the cuts of arms was greatly reduced.

Among the spectators, there were not a few experts with similar acupoint sealing technique to treat injuries, but Zhang Wuji’s technique actually made everybody felt ashamed of their own inferiority. They did not even know what extraordinary technique Zhang Wuji was using.

The Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao said, “Thank you very much Shaoxia [young hero] for your kindness and loyalty. May I ask your honorable surname and great given name?”

“Zaixia [lit. under/below, the humble one] surnamed Zeng,

called Ahniu,” Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, “Come over here, young fellow; take my three sword stances.”

“I’m sorry, would Shitai wait a moment?” Zhang Wuji replied, “Helping people is more important.” He finished wrapping the wound from the cut arm of the last person before he finally turned around, cupped his fists and said, “Miejue Shitai, I am not your match, fighting with you, Senior, is even more beyond what I can think of. I only hope both sides will stop fighting and forget all grudges and grievances of the past.”

When he said ‘both sides will stop fighting’, his tone was very sincere. In his heart, the ‘two sides’ was equal to the memory of his departed parents. One side was the prestigious and upright schools, the side of his father’s Wudang Pai; the other was demonic and heretical way of his mother’s Heavenly Eagle Cult.

“Ha ha ...” Miejue Shitai laughed, “Just with a few words from a stinky kid you want us to stop fighting? What are you? The Most Revered in the Wulin World [wu lin zhi zun]?”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was moved. “May I ask what about the Most Revered in the Wulin World?” he asked.

Miejue Shitai replied, “He who has the Tulong Dao in his hand will still have to compete with my Yitian Sword to decide who is weak and who is strong, only then will he be the Most Revered in the Wulin World. By that time, it won’t be too late to give everybody orders.”

Hearing how their master ridiculed Zhang Wuji, the Emei Pai disciples laughed mockingly. There were people from the

other Sects who also laughed.

Based on his age and status, it was highly inappropriate for Zhang Wuji to say 'stop fighting'. Hearing everybody sneering at him, Zhang Wuji blushed to the root of his hair. But he still could not bear to stay silent. "Why did you kill so many people?" he asked, "Everybody has a father, mother, wife and children. You killed them, their children would turn into helpless orphans, receivers of others' bullying. You Senior are a follower of Buddha [orig. 'chu jia ren' - one who left home], please show mercy."

He spoke without authority, his manner was inappropriate, but he remembered his own life experience and spoke with sincerity. His words were passionate and earnest that those who heard him were moved. Mijue Shitai, however, remained wooden.

"Young fellow," she said in her cold voice, "Do I need you to lecture me? You are conceited because of your profound internal energy that you are blowing hot air in here. Very well, take my three palm strikes, and I will let these people go."

"I can't take even one palm strike from your disciple, how am I going to take three from Shitai?" Zhang Wuji said, "I do not dare to compete in martial art with you; I am only asking you to show mercy. Just consider yourself showing divine kindness to these people."

"Zeng Xianggong [young master]," in a loud voice Wu Jingcao called out, "No need to talk too much with this old thief nun. We would rather under die this old thief nun's hand than receive her fake benevolence."

With squinting eyes Mijue looked at Zhang Wuji and asked, "Who is your Shifu?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Although Father and Yifu both taught me martial arts, but they are not my Shifu." Thereupon he said, "I don't have any Shifu."

Once these words came out of his mouth, everybody present was very surprised. At first when he shook Jing Xuan with one stance, they thought he must be a disciple of a master, in their hearts there were thirty percent suspicions; who would have thought that he said he did not have any master? Wulin people revered their masters the most. It was not uncommon for someone unwilling to reveal his master's surname and given name; but very rare would someone who had a master to say he did not have any master. If Zhang Wuji said he did not have any Shifu, then he truly did not have any Shifu.

Miejue Shitai did not want to talk too much. "Receive the first strike!" she said. Her right hand stretched out with a casual slapping motion.

Faced with this circumstance, Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but to fight. Not daring to be careless, he pushed both palms out, receiving her one palm with his both hands. Unexpectedly Miejue Shitai's palm went down and then from below his hands swiftly slipped through his palms like an extraordinary slippery small fish. 'Slap! The palm squarely hit Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji was startled. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong protecting his body automatically reacted to the opponent's palm strength. But just before these two whiffs of tremendously strong internal energy collided, Miejue Shitai's palm strength suddenly disappeared without a trace. Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise. When he looked up to see her face, suddenly he felt as if the pit of his stomach was hit by an

iron hammer. Zhang Wuji staggered and was thrown rolling around twice on the ground. 'Wah!' he spurted out a mouthful of blood, which looked like a pile of mud on the sandy ground.

Miejue Shitai's palm power switched between 'swallowing' and 'throwing up', changing indeterminately, sucking and diverting the enemy's force before sending out her own strength again. It was the most refined and subtle of the internal energy cultivation of the martial art study. The spectators with profound martial art knowledge understood the amazing technique this palm; they all could not stop from cheering.

Zhu'er was extremely worried; she rushed toward Zhang Wuji and reached out to help him up, but suddenly her knees went numb and she slipped to the ground. Turned out although Zhang Wuji had unsealed her acupoints, the blood had not flowed freely. Seeing he received injury, in her anxiety she rushed to help, but after a short moment her strength gave up and she fell down.

"Ahniu Ge, you ... you ..." she called out.

Zhang Wuji felt the blood in his chest bubbling over. Shaking his hand he said, "I am not dead." And then he slowly crawled back up.

In the meantime, Miejue Shitai ordered three of her disciples, "Chop all the demons' right arms, no exceptions."

"Yes!" the three female disciples responded and with naked swords in their hands they walked toward the Rui Jin Flag people.

Zhang Wuji hastily said, "You ... you said if I take your three

palm strikes you will let them go. I ... I have received one strike, there are still ... still two more.”

When Miejue Shitai’s palm struck Zhang Wuji, she could tell that his internal energy was very strong, and not at all of the demonic and heretical way; it was rather similar to her own energy cultivation. She also knew that although he was protecting the Devil Cult people, he was not a Devil Cult member.

“Young people should not meddle in other people’s business,” she said, “Upright and heretic should be distinguished clearly. In that one palm strike I only used thirty percent of my strength; do you know?”

Zhang Wuji knew that as a Sect Leader of a respectable sect, her words could not be empty; if she said she had used only thirty percent of her strength, then she must have used only thirty percent of her strength. But no matter how hard-to-resist the next two palm strikes would be, he could not consider his own life more important by looking helplessly while she was harming the Rui Jin Flag people. Thereupon he said, “Disregarding my own capability, Zaixia would like ... would like to receive Shitai’s two palm strikes.”

Wu Jingcao called loudly, “Zeng Xianggong, we deeply feel your kindness! You are a hero who upholds justice and loyalty, deserving everybody’s utmost admiration and gratitude. You must not receive the remaining two palm strikes.”

Seeing Zhu’er fell by Zhang Wuji’s side, Miejue Shitai was annoyed because she obstructed her hands and feet. Her left sleeve brushed away, she rolled Zhu’er inside the sleeve and threw her back. Zhou Zhiruo rushed one step forward to take her and gently laid her down on the ground.

Zhu'er anxiously said, "Zhou Jiejie [older sister], quickly urge him not to receive the other two palm strikes. If you say it, he would listen."

"Why would he listen to me?" Zhou Zhiruo wondered.

"In his heart, he likes you very much," Zhu'er said, "Don't you know it?"

Zhou Zhiruo blushed profusely. "Pei!" she spat, "How can there be such a thing?"

In a loud and clear voice Miejue Shitai said, "Since you insist on being the real man, the hero, it is you who seek your own death. You must not blame me." Raising her right hand, with a strong gust of wind it attacked straight to Zhang Wuji's chest.

This time Zhang Wuji did not dare to lift up his hand to block; he wanted to avoid her palm power by leaning sideways. Miejue Shitai bent her right arm and turned it around quickly. From a seemingly impossible angle, her palm shot straight forward. 'Slap!' It struck him squarely on his back. Like a bunch of straw Zhang Wuji flew horizontally in the air and fell down heavily on the ground. His body crumpled motionlessly in the sand, it looked like he had met a violent death.

In this palm strike, Miejue Shitai's technique was flawless and exquisite beyond comparison, the spectators should have cheered; but in their hearts, everybody was secretly admiring Zhang Wuji's chivalry. Seeing he met with an unfortunate incident, they all called out in alarm and sighed; unexpectedly, no one cheered.

"Zhou Jiejie," Zhu'er begged, "Please, look at his injury; is it

heavy?"

Zhou Zhiruo's heart was pounding. Hearing Zhu'er was asking earnestly, she wanted to step out and look at his injury; but everybody was staring at Zhang Wuji. How could she, an eighteen, nineteen years old young woman, dare to look at a young man's injury? Much less the injury was caused by her own master. Although it might not be considered a blatant rebellion against her school if she stepped out, she would inadvertently show great disrespect toward her Shifu. Therefore, she had taken a step, but she pulled back.

By this time the sky was bright with the morning sun. A moment later Zhang Wuji's back seemed to be moving. He struggled hard to sit up slowly, but when his elbow was about a foot from the ground, his strength was gone; he spurted another mouthful of blood and tumbled again to the ground. In his daze, all he wanted was to lie down quietly, but he remembered he still had to take another palm strike to save the Rui Jin Flag people's lives. He took a deep breath and finally was able to sit up, but his body was swaying, as if he was ready to fall back down any second.

Everybody else was holding their breath while watching him intently. There were several hundred people all around, but it was so quiet that a fallen needle would be clearly heard.

In this complete silence, Zhang Wuji suddenly recalled several lines from the Nine Yang Manual:

'He is strong, let him be strong,
The cool breeze brushes away the small hill;
He is rowdy, let him be rowdy,
The bright moon shines on the great river.'

He had recited these lines several times in the deep valley, but had never understood the meaning. This time he

suddenly understood: Miejue Shitai was strong and ruthless, fierce beyond compare; definitely not his match. But in light of the essence of the Nine Yang Manual, it appeared that regardless of how strong and fierce the enemy, regardless of how ferocious, to him it was no more than a cool breeze brushing away the hill or a bright moon illuminating a river. Although he could feel the cool breeze of the bright moon, it would not bring him any harm. But how? What should he do that he would not receive any harm?

The next lines in the Manual said,

'Let him be fierce, let him be ruthless,

a mouthful of 'zhen qi' [real/genuine 'chi'] is enough for me.'

Thinking to this point, his mind suddenly opened. He sat cross-legged and regulated his breathing according to the technique described in the Manual. Almost instantly he felt a warm and comfortable feeling in his 'dan tian' [pubic region], lively and strong; the 'zhen qi' flowed into his four limbs and the hundreds of bones in his body. He was finally able to unleash the formidable power of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. Although his flesh wound was so heavy that he vomited fresh blood, the 'zhen qi' inside his body indeed did not suffer the least bit of damage.

Watching him circulating his 'chi' to treat his injury, Miejue Shitai could not restrain her astonishment. This young man indeed possessed some extraordinary skill. The first stance she used to strike Zhang Wuji was from the 'piao xue chuan yun zhang' [floating snow piercing the cloud palm technique]. The second palm strike was even fiercer, it was the third stance of the 'jie shou jiu shi' [nine style cutting hand; the word 'cut' here means 'cut (or truncate) into section' or 'cut to length', not 'slice' or 'chop' kind of cuts]. Both were the best features of the Emei Pai palm techniques.

In the first strike she used only thirty percent of her strength. In the second strike, she added the power to

seventy percent. She presumed that if he did not get killed violently on the spot, his muscles and bones would certainly be shattered that he would be paralyzed and would not be able to move anymore. Who would have thought that after lying down for half a day he was able to sit up? It was totally beyond her anticipation.

According to the Wulin world custom, Miejue Shitai was not required to wait for him to circulate his breathing to treat his injury. But she was a person of high status, she definitely must not take advantage of her opponent's precarious position, especially since her opponent was of the younger generation.

"Hey, the one surnamed Zeng!" Ding Minjun called loudly, "If you do not dare to take my Shifu's third palm strike, just roll away as far as you can. If you are treating your injury for a lifetime in here, shall we also wait for you for a lifetime in here?"

"Ding Shijie," Zhou Zhiruo softly said, "There is no harm in letting him rest for a moment longer."

"You ... are you protecting an outsider?" Ding Minjun angrily said, "Looking at this boy ..." She wanted to say, 'Looking at this boy to be a handsome one, you are having ideas in your mind.' But she immediately remembered there were not just a few notable warriors of the other major sects standing around, naturally she must not utter this kind of vulgar language; and thus she stopped just in time. However, how could everybody present not understand her implication? Although she did not finish her words, it was not any different than if she had said it out loud.

Zhou Zhiruo was ashamed and anxious at the same time. Her face paled from the anger rising in her breast, but she was not willing to bicker. "Xiao Mei is only concerned over our school and Shizun's [respected master] prestige," she

said drily, "I hope others will not spread a gossip."

"What gossip?" Ding Minjun was surprised.

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Our school's martial art is well known all over the world, Shifu is one of the very best Senior Masters of the present age; she will not lower herself to the level of this junior young fellow. It's just that he was outrageously arrogant that she went into action to teach him a lesson. Do you think she really want to take his life? Our Sect's chivalry is renowned for nearly a hundred years, Shizun's benevolence and chivalry is magnanimous, who does not look up to her in admiration? This youngster is just like a candle, how can he be compared to the glorious light of the sun and the moon? Even if we let him train for a hundred more years, he still would not be our Shizun's match. Much less letting him tending his injury for a bit longer; what difference will it make?"

Her speech had made all who heard inwardly nod their heads. Miejue Shitai's delight was even greater, thinking that this young disciple indeed understood the cardinal principle and had raised their Sect's prestige in the eyes of the masters of other Sects.

As soon as Zhang Wuji finished circulating his 'zhen qi' for one round, his spirit was lifted and his body refreshed. He heard everything Zhou Zhiruo had said, and was aware that she had done everything she could to protect him. Also, based on her words, Miejue Shitai would be inconvenienced to strike him with a murderous intent. His heart was flooded with gratitude. He stood up and said, "Shitai, 'wanbei' will put my life at your service by taking your last palm strike."

Seeing that his vigor immediately returned after only sitting cross-legged for a while, Miejue Shitai mused, "This kid's

internal energy is indeed very deep, it's magical." She said, "You may fight me back. Who told you to take the beating without retaliating?"

"With 'wanbei's tiny bit of coarse martial art skill, I cannot touch even half a 'fen' [1 fen is approximately 1/3 cm or a little over 1/8"] of the corner of Shitai's clothes, how could I think of retaliating?" Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai said, "Since you already know it, then why don't you run away at the earliest opportunity? A young man with this kind of courageous spirit is hard to come by. Miejue Shitai's palm does not normally show mercy, but today I am willing to make exception for you."

Zhang Wuji bowed. "Many thanks, Qianbei," he said, "Will you also spare these big brothers of the Rui Jin Flag?"

Miejue Shitai's long eyebrows drooped down. With a cold laugh she said, "Do you know what my Buddhist title is?"

"Qianbei's honorable title consists of the character 'Mie' [extinguish or overthrow (a regime)] at the top and 'Jue' [extinct or vanish, completely] at the bottom," Zhang Wuji replied.

"It's good that you know it," Miejue Shitai said, "Demons and heretical disciples, I must 'extinguish' and 'cut short'; I simply cannot show mercy. Do you think the two characters 'Miejue' [wipe out/destroy] is an empty name?"

"That being the case," Zhang Wuji said, "Qianbei may send out your third palm strike."

Miejue Shitai cast him a sidelong glance. She had never seen a more tenacious youth in her entire life. She was usually cold-hearted, but this time she started to feel

affection toward this talented young man. She thought, "Once my third palm strike is launched, he would definitely die. Since he is not a master of the demonical way, it would be a pity if he loses his life in such a young age!" After hesitating for a moment, she made up her mind. The third palm strike would hit the vital acupoint above his 'dantian', she would transmit her internal energy to shake his 'dantian' to stop his breathing so that he would faint instantly. After executing the Rui Jin Flag demons, she would help awaken him.

Brushing her left sleeve, she was about to launch the third palm strike when suddenly she heard someone called out, "Miejue Shitai, hold your palm!"

These words were spoken with a shrill voice, as sharp as a needle piercing everybody's ears; it was extremely uncomfortable. They saw from the northwest corner came a man wearing white robe, waving a folding fan in his hand, walking through the crowd. His feet did not raise the sand at all; it was as if he was floating over the water. The left lapel of this man's white robe was embroidered with a tiny black eagle with its wings spread out like it was soaring in the sky.

As soon as they saw him, everybody knew this man must be a master of the Heavenly Eagle Cult. Turned out the uniform of the Heavenly Eagle Cult was similar to the Ming Cult's uniform, which was white robe. Only the Ming Cult's uniform was embroidered with a red flame, while the Heavenly Eagle Cult's uniform was embroidered with a black eagle.

The man walked to within three 'zhang' from Miejue Shitai. He cupped his fists and said with a laugh, "Shitai, please, this third palm strike, how about I take it instead?"

"Who are you?" Miejue Shitai asked.

The man replied, "Zaixia surnamed Yin, and is called Yewang."

Once the name 'Yin Yewang' was uttered, a commotion broke among the people. Yin Yewang's reputation was indeed loud and clear throughout the Jianghu for the last twenty years. A lot of Wulin people said that his martial art skill was very high; as a matter of fact, it did not differ too far from his father, the Bai Mei Ying Wang, Yin Tianzheng. He was the 'tang zhu' [hall leader] of the Heavenly Eagle Cult's 'tian wei tang' [Heaven's Secret Hall]; his authority was second only to the Cult Leader.

Miejue Shitai estimated this man was no more than forty some years of age, but his pair of eyes was like a cold lightning sweeping everybody around, his manner was imposing and intimidating. Truly he was not someone to be trifled with, especially since she had heard quite a bit about his reputation. Therefore, with a cold voice she said, "What is this kid to you that you want to take my palm strike on his behalf?"

In his heart, Zhang Wuji cried out, "He is my Jiujiu [maternal uncle], my Jiujiu! Could it be that he recognized me and has come for me?"

Yin Yewang laughed out loud and said, "I don't even know him. I only saw that he is young yet strong-willed, not at all like those hypocritical Wulin people, those disciples who always fish for compliment. I am pleased, and thus I want to receive instruction and see how good Shitai's skill is."

The last few words were not spoken politely, apparently he did not have too high of a consideration toward Miejue Shitai. But Miejue Shitai was not angry, she turned toward

Zhang Wuji and said, "Kid, if you still want to live for a few years longer, it is not too late for you to go away at this time."

"Wanbei does not dare to be greedy of live and forget loyalty," Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai nodded. She turned back toward Yin Yewang. "This kid still owes me one palm strike. Our own account will be settled a (pen) stroke for a stroke. I will certainly not disappoint Sire."

"Hey, hey," Yin Yewang sneered, "Miejue Shitai, if you have the ability, kill this young man. If this young man loses his life, I guarantee all of you will die without any burial site." As soon as he finished speaking, he floated back through the crowd while shouted, "Get out!"

Suddenly from the sandy ground around them appeared innumerable heads; each one had a shield in front of his body, while their hands held drawn bows. Row after row of arrowheads were aimed at the Major Sects' people.

Turned out the Heavenly Eagle Cult people had dug a tunnel under the sand and surrounded those people. Because everybody's attention was focused on Miejue Shitai and Zhang Wuji exchanging palm strikes, nobody suspected anything. Song Qingshu and the others were experienced warriors; they were on guard against the Heavenly Eagle Cult's frontal attack. They did not anticipate the Heavenly Eagle Cult would take advantage of the soft sandy ground by excavating underground tunnel and occupying a strategic position, taking full advantage of the terrain around them.

Everyone's face changed; they saw that the arrowheads

emitted bluish rays under the bright sunlight, obviously the arrows were poisoned. As soon as Yin Yewang issued his order, it would be difficult for the upright sects' people to protect their own lives, other than a few masters with the highest martial art skill. Among the five Sects present, in term of seniority, prestige and age, Mijue Shitai was the most senior, therefore, everybody turned their eyes to her, waiting for her to issue an order.

Mijue Shitai was simply too obstinate; although she knew the situation was highly unfavorable for her side, she was completely unmoved. "Kid," she said to Zhang Wuji, "You'd better blame yourself for your fate." Suddenly her entire bones started to pop and crack, not at all unlike the noise of beans being pan-fried; as her right hand went straight toward Zhang Wuji's chest.

This palm strike was the pinnacle of Emei Pai's skill, it was called the 'fo guang pu zhao' [The Light of Buddha illuminates everything]. Any palm or sword technique always consists of an unbroken set of complementary stances. The technique could contain as many as several hundred stances, or as little as three or five styles. But whether it was three styles or five stances, in each style would hide several variations that one style could be executed in many stances, as many as a dozen stances. However, this 'fo guang pu zhao' only had one stance. Not only this one stance did not have further variations, once it was launched, whether it struck the chest or the back or the shoulder or the face, the style was plain, almost boring; it was always the same style. Its formidable power came from the Emei Pai's Jiu Yang Gong as its foundation. Once it was executed, the opponent would not be able to either block or evade.

At present, other than Mijue Shitai, no one else was able to

launch this stance. At first she only wanted to strike Zhang Wuji's 'dantian' to knock him out momentarily, but after Yin Yewang issued his threat, if she showed leniency, people would think that she did not show mercy, she only was afraid of death, and was kneeling in front of the enemy to surrender. Therefore, she had put all her strength into this one stance, without leaving any room to maneuver.

Seeing that her strike was preceded by popping and cracking of her bones, Zhang Wuji knew this palm strike was not a small matter. With the life and death would be decided in the next split seconds, how could Zhang Wuji dare to be negligent? In this instant he remembered the phrase from the Manual: 'Let him be fierce, let him be ruthless, a mouthful of 'zhen qi' is enough for me'. Without thinking about how he was going to fend off the attack at all, he took a deep breath and gathered a whiff of 'zhen qi' in his chest.

With a very loud 'Bang!' Miejue Shitai's palm struck Zhang Wuji's chest. All the spectators cried out in alarm, as they believed the entire bones in Zhang Wuji's body would be shattered to dust, or perhaps this earth-shattering force would break his body in two. Who would have thought that when the dust settled, they saw Zhang Wuji, with a shocked expression on his face, was still standing in one piece, while Miejue Shitai's face was as grey as a corpse while her palm trembled slightly.

What happened was: Miejue Shitai's stance, 'fo guang pu zhao' purely took Emei Jiu Yang Gong as its foundation, which originated from the real Jiu Yang Shen Gong, which Zhang Wuji trained. After listening to Jue Yuan reciting the Nine Yang Manual, Guo Xiang developed Emei Jiu Yang Gong based on fragments she managed to remember. As a result, the power of Emei Jiu Yang Gong of course cannot be mentioned on equal terms with the original Jiu Yang Shen

Gong. However, the power of these two internal energies were comparable, the essence was identical. When Emei Jiu Yang Gong met the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, it was like river and stream entering the ocean, or like milk dissolved into water, instantly disappeared without any trace.

Miejue Shitai's first palm strike, the Floating Snow Penetrating the Cloud, and the second strike, the Nine-Style Cutting Hand, were not based on Emei Jiu Yang Gong; therefore, when the palm hit Zhang Wuji, the strikes had caused him to be injured and to throw up blood. This reasoning was unknown to everybody present. Zhang Wuji admittedly did not have vast knowledge, but although Miejue Shitai possessed an extensive experience and knowledge, her thoughts were no more than that this kid's internal energy was so deep that she was not able to inflict any harm. Therefore, other than Miejue Shitai herself, the hundreds of people, inside and outside of the besiege, all believed that she was being lenient, or that she was taken by Zhang Wuji's unyielding character, or perhaps she was working for the benefits of all, unwilling to let the Five Major Sects suffer disastrous casualties under the Heavenly Eagle Cult's poisoned arrows. Some even went so far as assuming she was a coward who submitted under Yin Yewang's threat.

Zhang Wuji bowed and cupped his fists. "Many thanks Qianbei for holding your palm and showing mercy," he said.

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, she was in a very awkward situation; if she struck again, she would clearly breach her own words that she would strike him three times, but if she dropped the case, she would suffer great embarrassment by yielding to the Heavenly Eagle Cult's will.

While she was still in a quandary, Yin Yewang had already laughed aloud and said, "Only an outstanding talent can

submit to circumstances. Miejue Shitai has proven herself to be a great master of the present age." To his people he ordered, "Withdraw the arrows!"

The Heavenly Eagle Cult people turned around abruptly and withdrew; like a wave row after row of shields and bows and arrows rolled away in a very neat formation. It appeared that Yin Yewang's troops were trained for battle; whether they are attacking or withdrawing, they followed certain rules.

Miejue Shitai's countenance darkened, yet she did not know what to say in her defense; would she say that in the last palm strike she was showing mercy? Everybody had clearly seen how with gentle strike she had inflicted serious injury to Zhang Wuji, twice in a row. But under Yin Yewang's threat, the third palm, which appeared to carry a tremendous force, did not injure Zhang Wuji in the least bit. No matter how hard she defended herself, nobody would believe her. Much less she was always an arrogant person; how could she ask everybody to believe her?

While staring maliciously at Zhang Wuji, she called in a loud and clear voice, "Yin Yewang, if you want to test my palm power, come over here."

Yin Yewang cupped his fists and said, "After receiving Shitai's compassion today, I do not dare to offend further. We will meet again someday soon."

Miejue Shitai waved her left sleeve; without saying anything she led her disciples to walk quickly westward. The people of Kunlun, Huashan and Kongtong Pai, as well as Yin Liting and Song Qingshu, followed behind them.

Zhu'er's legs were still paralyzed. "Ahniu Ge," she said anxiously, "Quickly take me away." But Zhang Wuji wanted

very much to speak a few words with Yin Yewang. "Wait a moment," he said, and he walked toward Yin Yewang.

"Qianbei has rendered a great assistance, 'wanbei' will never dare to forget," he said.

Yin Yewang pulled his hand and look at him from top to bottom, sizing him up. "You are surnamed Zheng?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji had the urge to throw himself into his bosom and call out, 'Jiujiu, Jiujiu!' But in the end he forced himself not to do that, although he could not stop his eyes from turning red. There was a saying, 'Seeing (maternal) uncle is like seeing one's mother.' Since his parents died, Yin Yewang was the first close family member he had seen in more than ten years, how could his heart not get excited?

Yin Yewang saw the affectionate look on his eyes, but he thought that Zhang Wuji was very grateful because he had saved his life, so he did not further think about this matter. His eyes turned toward Zhu'er, who was lying down on the ground. With a dry laugh he said, "Ah Li, are you all right?"

Zhu'er looked up; her eyes were brimming with hatred. Immediately she lowered her head and after a while she called out, "Father!"

As soon as she called, 'Father', Zhang Wuji was shocked. But his mind was churning fast, and very soon he understood everything. "Turns out Zhu'er is Jiujiu's daughter; in that case she is my Biaomei [maternal younger female cousin]. She has killed her second mother, and thus vexed her own mother to her death. She also said that her father would kill her if he sees her ... Oh, she used the 'qian zhu wan du shou' to pierce Yin Wulu, must be because these brothers, just like their masters, were not good toward these mother and

daughter. Although Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou hated her very much, they cannot fight with her, hence they only said a sentence, 'It is San Xiaojie' before taking Yin Wulu away."

Turning his head around toward Zhu'er, suddenly he remembered something else, "No wonder I always felt that her mannerism very much resembled my Mama, turns out she is my own blood relative; my Ma was her (paternal) aunt."

He heard Yin Yewang's cold laugh. "You still call me 'Father'? Humph, I know you have followed Jin Hua Popo and did not have any regard toward the Heavenly Eagle Cult. You are a hopeless kid, exactly like your Mama, train that 'qian zhu wan du shou'. Humph, look in the mirror, tell me, is there any ugly freak in my Yin family?"

At first Zhu'er was so frightened that her whole body trembled, but suddenly she turned her head and stared directly at her father's face, while in a loud and clear voice she said, "Father, if you did not raise the past matters, I wouldn't have raise them either. But since you mentioned it, I want to ask you: you were happily married with Mama, why did you take Er Niang [second mother]?"

"This ... this ..." Yin Yewang said, "Dead girl, which one among the men did not have three wives, four concubines? You are disobedient and unfilial; it's useless to debate with you today. You do not have any regard to Jin Hua Popo, Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf], or the Heavenly Eagle Cult." He waved his hand to his back and said to Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou, "Take this girl along. Let's go."

Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms to block. "Hold on!" he said, "Yin ... Yin Qianbei, why do you want to take her along?"

“This girl is my daughter,” Yin Yewang replied, “She killed her stepmother and vexed her own mother to death; she is more like a beast than a human being, how can I let her live in this world?”

Zhang Wuji said, “At that time Miss Yin was still very young, seeing her mother bullied by others, she was enraged and had made the mistake of taking matters into her own hands. I beseech Qianbei to remember the love between a father and his daughter and punish her leniently.”

Yin Yewang laughed with his face toward the sky. “Young fellow,” he said, “Who do you think you are that you always meddle with other people’s business? Why, you even want to interfere with my Yin family’s internal affair. Are you the ‘Most Revered in the Wulin World’?”

Zhang Wuji’s mind was stirred. He really wanted to shout, “I am your nephew, I am not an outsider.” But in the end he held his peace.

“Kid,” Yin Yewang laughed, “You are lucky that today your life was spared. But if you keep meddling into the Jianghu people’s business like this, even if you have ten little lives, that won’t be enough.” While saying that, he waved his left hand. Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou stepped forward to pick up Zhu’er then they followed Yin Yewang.

Zhang Wuji knew that falling into her father’s hand this time, Zhu’er would most likely not have the good fortune to keep her life. In his desperation, he pounced forward trying to snatch her away.

Yin Yewang frowned; like a lightning his hand reached out and grabbed Zhang Wuji’s chest and gently tossed him

away. Zhang Wuji's body refused to follow its master's order; like soaring into the clouds or sailing in the fog he flew out and 'Bang!' he fell heavily into the yellow sand. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside his body protected him that he did not sustain any injury; but falling into the sand, his eyes, ears, mouth and nose were full of sand that it was unbearably uncomfortable. Unwilling to give up, he crawled up trying to grab Zhu'er again.

"Kid," with a cold laugh Yin Yewang said, "I was being lenient the first time, don't force me to be impolite the second time."

Zhang Wuji earnestly begged, "She ... she is your own daughter. When she was little you carried her in your arms, you kissed her. Please spare her."

Yin Yewang's heart was touched, but when he turned his head to look at Zhu'er, he saw her bumpy face, and could not help feeling even more loathsome. "Get out of my way!" he shouted.

Zhang Wuji took a step closer instead, still trying to grab Zhu'er.

"Ahniu Ge," Zhu'er called out, "Don't mind me. I will always remember your kindness to me. Just go away, you are not my father's match."

Right this moment, suddenly someone in dark green robe flew out of the sandy ground. Stretching out both hands, he grabbed Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou by the back of their collars and brought his arms together, hard. The two men's heads bumped to each other and they fainted instantly. That man grabbed Zhu'er and carrying her in his arms, he swiftly ran away.

“Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei],” Yin Yewang shouted angrily, “You also want to meddle in my business?”

Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao let out a loud and long laugh, while carrying Zhu'er speeding along forward. He was called 'Yixiao' [one laugh], but his laughter was continuous without pausing; why wasn't he called 'a hundred laugh' or 'a thousand laugh'?

Yin Yewang and Zhang Wuji anxiously pursued at the same time. This time Wei Yixiao no longer run in circles; he flew straight toward the southwest direction. His feet moved very fast, almost unthinkable. Yin Yewang's internal energy was deep; his 'qing gong' was also excellent. The 'zhen qi' circulated inside Zhang Wuji's body; he ran faster and faster. But Wei Yixiao's speed was even more difficult to be dealt with. When they started, he was only a few 'zhang' ahead, but not too long afterwards, he increased the distance to a dozen 'zhang', then twenty some 'zhang', thirty some 'zhang' ... until finally his shadow vanished in the horizon.

In his extreme anger Yin Yewang laughed. He was secretly amazed to notice that all along Zhang Wuji was able to run alongside him, without falling behind even for a half step. By this time he knew perfectly well that he would not be able to overtake Wei Yixiao, but he still wanted to test this youngster's legs' strength, so he increased his speed. Like an arrow leaving the string his body shot forward, but he still saw Zhang Wuji was able to keep up, still running side-by-side with him.

Suddenly he heard Zhang Wuji say, “Yin Qianbei, although this Qing Yi Fu Wang can run fast, he might not necessarily have the strength to run long distance. We might be able to catch up with him eventually.”

Yin Yewang was startled; he stopped his steps immediately, while thinking, "In unleashing my 'qing gong' like this, I have exhausted my life-long cultivated strength. I can't afford to make any mistake in regulating my breath, let alone to open my mouth to speak. This young man is able to speak, yet his feet did not slow down at all. What kind of skill is this?"

When he stopped suddenly, Zhang Wuji had already flown several 'zhang' forward. Hastily Zhang Wuji turned around and returned to Yin Yewang, ready to listen to his instruction.

"Zeng Xiongdi," Yin Yewang said, "Who is your Shifu?"

"No, no!" Zhang Wuji hastily said, "You must not call me 'Xiongdi' [brother], I am your 'wanbei' [younger generation], you, Senior, just call me 'Ahniu'. I do not have any Shifu."

A murderous intent grew in Yin Yewang's heart; he mused, "This kid's martial art skill is this weird, if I leave him alive, he might bring disaster later on. I'd better strike preemptively and kill him with a palm."

Right this moment, suddenly they heard several sharp noise of ocean conch horn from the distant; it was precisely the Heavenly Eagle Cult's emergency signal. Yin Yewang creased his eyebrows. "Must be Hong Shui and Lie Huo Flags blaming me for not helping Rui Jin Flag that they create trouble for us," he mused, "If I failed to kill this kid with one palm strike, I would not have time to engage him in a dogfight at this time. I'd better borrow somebody else's knife to kill him; I'll let him deliver his own life into Wei Yixiao's hands." Thereupon he said, "The Heavenly Eagle Cult is facing an enemy; I must return at once to render my assistance. You can go alone to find Wei Yixiao. This man is

ferocious and sinister, as soon as you meet him, you must strike first to gain the upper hand."

"My skill is so low and inadequate, how can I fight him?" Zhang Wuji said, "Who is your enemy?"

Yin Yewang inclined his ears to listen to the bugle call. "It is indeed the Ming Cult's Hong Shui, Lie Huo and Hou Tu, three Flags have arrived."

Zhang Wuji said, "Everybody belongs to the Ming Cult; why must you fight and kill each other like this?"

Yin Yewang's face sank as he said, "What does a child like you understand? Are you meddling in other people's business again?" Turning around, he rushed back to where he came from.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Zhu'er has fallen into the hands of the great demon Wei Yixiao; if he bites her on the throat and sucks her blood, how can she keep her life?" Having had this thought, his anxiety grew; he took a deep breath and unleashing his 'zhen qi', he dashed forward to give a chase.

Luckily, although Wei Yixiao's 'qing gong' was excellent, because he was carrying someone in his arms, he was not able to step on the sand without leaving any trace; he still left behind a set of his footprints on the desert sand. Zhang Wuji made up his mind, "If he stop to rest, I won't take a rest; if he stop to sleep, I won't sleep. Even if I have to run for three days and three nights, I will overtake him."

However, running for three days and nights under the hot sun on the yellow sand was truly easier said than done; he ran until dusk, and his mouth dried out and his lips parched, while his entire body was sweating like rain. But strangely,

his legs did not get weary. Bit by bit the Jiu Yang Shen Gong he cultivated for several years showed its effectiveness, the more he used his energy, his vigor grew more abundantly. He stopped by a spring to fill his stomach with water, and then continued following Wei Yixiao's tracks nonstop until midnight. He saw the moon was right in the middle of the sky. Suddenly a feeling of dread overcame Zhang Wuji; he was afraid that while he was running, Zhu'er's body, with her blood sucked dry, would suddenly appear in front of him.

Right this moment, he seemed to hear faint footsteps behind him. Quickly he turned around, but did not see anybody. Unwilling to be delayed, he continued running forward; but the footsteps appeared again behind him. Greatly puzzled, he turned around again; still he did not see anybody. Looking carefully on the desert ground, he saw three sets of tracks; one obviously belonged to Wei Yixiao, one belonged to him, but where did the third track come from? Turning his head again, he saw ahead of him there was only Wei Yixiao's track. In that case, someone was following him; no doubt about it. But why couldn't he see the person? Could it be that this person knew magic of making himself invisible?

Preoccupied with doubts, he continued running forward, and sure enough, the footsteps behind him reappeared. "Who's there?" Zhang Wuji called out.

"Who's there?" a voice behind him echoed.

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "Are you a human or a ghost?" he asked sternly.

"Are you a human or a ghost?" the voice echoed.

With a great speed Zhang Wuji turned around again. This time he saw a flash of shadow of the person behind him, so

he was convinced that someone with an exceptionally swift footwork did indeed follow behind him.

"Why are you following me?" he asked.

"Why am I following you?" that person replied.

Zhang Wuji laughed. "How do I know?" he said, "I was asking you."

"How do I know?" that person replied, "I was asking you."

Zhang Wuji knew this person probably did not have any malicious intention; he had been following him for a while, if he wanted to, it would be easy for him to make his move and send Zhang Wuji to his doom. Thereupon he said, "By what name are you called?"

"Can't say [Shuo Bude]," came the reply.

"Why can't you say it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"If I can't say it, then I can't say it; why should I explain to you the reason?" the man said, "By what name are you called?"

"I ... I am called Zeng Ahniu," Zhang Wuji replied.

"You are running wildly in the middle of the night; what are you doing?" the man asked.

Zhang Wuji knew this man must be one who loved to play trick on others. He said, "A friend of mine is captured by the Qing Yi Fu Wang, I am going to rescue her back."

"You cannot rescue her," the man said.

"Why not?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"The man said, "Qing Yi Fu Wang's martial art is stronger than yours; you cannot beat him."

"Even if I cannot beat him, I must fight him," Zhang Wuji said.

"Very good, you have the spirit," the man said, "Is your friend a young woman?"

"Correct," Zhang Wuji replied, "How do you know?"

"If it were not for a young woman, would a young man be willing to risk his life?" the man said, "Is she very beautiful?"

"Very ugly!" Zhang Wuji replied.

"How about you?" the man asked, "Are you ugly or not?"

"Come over here," Zhang Wuji replied, "You can see it for yourself."

"I don't want to see," the man said, "Does that young woman know martial arts?"

"She does," Zhang Wuji said, "She is the daughter of Yin Yewang Qianbei from the Heavenly Eagle Cult, and has learned martial art from Jin Hua Popo of the Lingshe Island."

"You don't need to pursue," the man said, "Once Wei Yixiao got hold of her, he will never let her go."

"Why is that?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Humph," the man snorted, "You are a fool, you can't use

your head. Who is Yin Yewang to Yin Tianzheng?"

"They are father and son," Zhang Wuji replied.

The man asked, "Bai Mei Ying Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang, whose martial art skill is stronger?"

"I don't know," Zhang Wuji replied, "May I ask Qianbei, who is stronger?"

"Each one has his own strong point," the man said, "Whose influence is greater?"

"Ying Wang is the Heavenly Eagle Cult's Cult Leader," Zhang Wuji said, "I suppose his influence must be somewhat greater."

"That's right," the man said, "Consequently, by seizing Yin Tianzheng's granddaughter, Wei Yixiao can take advantage of her by use her as a leverage, he can force Yin Tianzheng to submit to him."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "I am afraid that is impossible," he said, "Yin Yewang Qianbei is insistent in wanting to kill his own daughter."

"And why is that?" the man was puzzled.

Thereupon Zhang Wuji told him briefly how Zhu'er had killed her father's beloved concubine and had caused the death of her own mother.

When Zhang Wuji finished, the man clicked his tongue and said, "Amazing, truly amazing. She is a perfect material."

"What material?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

The man replied, "In such a young age she was able to kill her stepmother, indirectly killed her own mother, and has received training under Jin Hua Popo of the Lingshe Island. I think she is a treasure. Wei Yixiao must want to take her as his disciple."

Zhang Wuji was stunned. "How do you know?" he asked.

"Wei Yixiao is my good friend," the man replied, "Naturally I understand his temperament."

Zhang Wuji's mind went blank for a moment before he called out loudly, "It's bad!" and rushed forward. That man also ran closely behind him.

While still running, Zhang Wuji asked, "Why are you following me?"

"I am curious," the man replied, "I want to see some excitement. What are you going to do when you overtake Wei Yixiao?"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "Zhu'er is already rather heretical. I must stop her from taking Wei Yixiao as her master. What would happen if she also learned to become a demon who sucks other people's blood?"

"Do you like Zhu'er that much?" the man asked, "Why do you care that much of her?"

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "I don't know if I like her or not; it's just that she ... she is a little bit like my mother."

"Hmm, so your Mama is also an ugly freak; it may be assumed that you are not too good-looking," the man said.

"My Mama was very good-looking," Zhang Wuji quickly said, "Don't talk nonsense!"

"What a pity, what a pity!" the man said.

"What do you mean, 'what a pity'?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The man replied, "You are young and have some guts. You are brave and upright, which is very good. It is too bad that very soon you will be a bloodless corpse."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred. "He is right," he mused, "Even if I can overtake Wei Yixiao, how can I save Zhu'er? Won't I simply deliver my own life in vain?"

"Qianbei," he said, "Will you help me?"

"No, I can't," the man replied, "First, Wei Yixiao is my friend. Second, I am also not his match."

"If Wei Yixiao is your friend, why didn't you advise him?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"Advice is useless," the man said, "Wei Yixiao himself does not want to suck people's blood, he has no choice, his suffering is indeed difficult to bear."

"He has no choice?" Zhang Wuji asked in bewilderment, "How can that be?"

"Wei Yixiao suffered a fire deviation when cultivating his internal energy," the man explained, "Henceforth, each time he uses his internal energy, he must drink human blood; otherwise his entire body would turn cold and he would freeze to death immediately."

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and said, "Does that mean the three 'yin' arteries in his armpits are damaged?"

"Ah, how do you know?" the man was surprised.

"I was just guessing," Zhang Wuji said, "I don't know if it is correct?"

The man said, "Three times I climbed the Changbai Mountain to find a fire toad for him to treat his illness, but three times I failed. The first time I did see a fire toad, but I missed by about two 'zhang'. The second and third time, not even the shadow of a fire toad was to be seen. After the current crisis is resolved, I am going back to try again."

"I can go together with you," ZhangWuji said, "Is that alright?"

"Hmm," the man said, "Your internal energy is enough, but your 'qing gong' is lacking too much, simply not enough. We'll talk again when the time comes. Hey, tell me, why do you want to help me find a fire toad?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "If we can catch one, not only Wei Yixiao's illness will be cured, we can also help a lot of people, because then he would not have to suck other people's blood anymore. Uh, Qianbei, he has already run for such a long time, he has used up his internal energy. If he has no other choice, won't he be forced to suck Zhu'er's blood?"

The man was taken aback. "That might be true," he said, "Although he wanted to take Zhu'er as his disciple, when the cold attack came, his blood will be congealed into ice. If that happened, I am afraid even his own daughter ..."

The more Zhang Wuji thought about it, the more he was frightened; he ran madly as if his life depended on it.

Suddenly the man exclaimed, "Ah, what's that behind you?"

Zhang Wuji turned his head around to see, but suddenly all he could see was darkness as his entire body was encased in an enormous sack; followed by the sensation of his body lifted to the air. It seemed like he was captured inside a cloth sack, which was lifted up by that man. Quickly he stretched out his arms, trying to rip the cloth sack. Who would have thought that the sack was made of neither silk nor animal hide? It was exceptionally tough and durable. He groped around to feel the cloth; obviously it was a coarse homespun cloth, but he could not make even a crack on the seam.

The man tossed the sack on the ground, laughed out loud and said, "If you can drill out of my sack, I'll consider you an expert."

Zhang Wuji exerted his internal energy and pushed ferociously outward with both hands, but the sack simply followed his push without showing the least bit of cracking under the stress. He raised his right foot and kicked with all his might. 'Pop!' the sack only curved outward slightly. It did not matter whether he pull, push, roll, stretch; the sack simply followed his movements without giving way to his strength.

The man laughed and said, "Do you give up?"

"I give up!" Zhang Wuji said.

'Slap!' the man slapped the sack right on his buttocks and said with a laugh, "Kid, just stay inside my 'qian kun yi qi

dai' [lit. Heaven and earth (the universe) air pocket] nicely, don't move; I am taking you to a good place. If you open your mouth to speak and your presence is exposed, I might not be able to save you."

"Where are you taking me?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The man replied, "Since you have fallen into my 'Universe Air Pocket', if I want to take your poor life, do you think you can run away? As long as you don't move and don't make any noise, you will reap the benefits."

Zhang Wuji thought the man made a lot of sense; therefore, he did not struggle anymore.

The man added, "You can get into my cloth sack; that is your good fortune." Slinging the cloth sack over his shoulder, he dashed forward.

"What about Zhu'er?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"How do I know?" the man replied, "You talk too much and make a lot of noise, I am going to shake you out of my cloth sack."

Zhang Wuji thought, "If you really shake me out of this cloth sack, I could not ask for anything more." But his mouth did not dare to reply; he only felt that this man's feet were very fast.

After running for several hours, inside the sack Zhang Wuji started to feel hot, so he knew it was already daytime and the sack was heated by the sun. A moment later, he felt the man was walking on an upward slope; it seemed that they were going up the mountain.

They continued climbing the mountain for more than four hours. Zhang Wuji felt the nip of the cold air on his body; he mused, "Looks like we are climbing a very high mountain, the peak must be covered in snow, that's why it is this cold."

Suddenly he felt his body was flying in the air. He could not restrain from shouting in surprise. But before his shout vanished, he felt they were stopping; that man had landed on the ground. Zhang Wuji understood, the man must have had taken him on a jump just now. He assumed that they were on a dangerous precipice on a high mountain peak; the man jumped while carrying him on his back, the mountain rocks must be very slippery since they were covered with ice and snow. Supposing his foot slipped, wouldn't it mean both of them falling together and die with their bones shattered?

He was just thinking about these things when the man leaped again. He successively leaped several times; sometimes he jumped higher, sometimes lower, sometimes he jumped far, sometimes near. Although Zhang Wuji was inside the cloth sack and could not see the least bit of light, he knew the local terrain must be extremely steep.

End of Chapter 18.

Chapter 19 - Disaster Arose Within the Broken Impenetrable Fortress

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Yuan Zhen pulled a dagger and ferociously stabbed it onto the sack. But where the point of the dagger met the sack, the dagger simply sank into the sack and bounced back out without creating any damage. Yuan Zhen successively stabbed several times, how could the blade overcome the sack? His leg flew up and he kicked with all his might. The large sack rolled straight toward the door of the hall.

Zhang Wuji was brought by the man leaping high one more time. Suddenly he heard someone calling out from a distance, "Shuo Bude, why are you this late?"

The man carrying Zhang Wuji replied, "I had to take care of a small matter along the way. Has Wei Yixiao arrived?"

"I haven't seen him!" the man in the distance answered, "This is strange, even for him to come this late. Shuo Bude, have you seen him?" They were talking back and forth while the man walked closer.

Zhang Wuji was inwardly surprised. "Turns out this man's name is Shuo Bude [can't say]," he mused, "No wonder when I asked his name he said, 'Can't say'. Even when I asked him again why he can't say it, his answer was ' Shuo Bude is just Shuo Bude; why should I explain to you the reason?' How can someone have such a weird name?" He thought further, "It seems like he has an appointment with Wei Yixiao to meet in here. I wonder how is Zhu'er? He is a good friend of Wei Yixiao; I wonder how are they going to deal with me?"

He heard Shuo Bude say, "Tieguan Dao Xiong [Taoist brother 'Iron Hat'], let us go seek Wei Xiong [brother Wei]; I am afraid he met some kind of trouble."

Priest Tieguan said, "Qing Yi Fu Wang is astute and

intelligent, his martial art skill is superb, what kind of trouble might he meet?"

"I just feel something is not right," Shuo Bude replied.

Suddenly from the valley below a voice came, "Stinky monk Shuo Bude, old mixed-up hair [a derogatory term to call a Taoist priest] Tieguan, come here quick! We need your help! It's bad! It's too bad!"

Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan were shocked. "It's Zhou Dian," they exclaimed together, "What might be so bad?"

Shuo Bude added, "Sounds like he is injured; why does his voice sound so weak?" Without waiting for Priest Tieguan's answer, he carried Zhang Wuji and leaped down the peak.

Priest Tieguan followed behind him. "Ah!" suddenly he said, "Zhou Dian is carrying someone on his back; who could it be? It's Wei Yixiao!"

"Zhou Dian, don't panic," Shuo Bude called, "We are coming to help you."

"Panic your Mama's fart!" Zhou Dian called back, "Why would I panic? The blood-sucking bat's old life is about to return to Heaven!"

Shuo Bude was startled, "What happened to Wei Xiong? What kind of injury does he suffer?" he asked, while quickening his pace.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji felt like he was mounting the clouds and riding on the mist; he could not help but saying in a low voice, "Qianbei, let me down for the time being, helping people is more important."

Shuo Bude suddenly lifted up the sack and tossed it in the air three times. Zhang Wuji was shocked; if Shuo Bude let his hands off, the sack would be thrown away, the consequences would be really hard to imagine. He heard Shuo Bude say in a calm and throaty voice, "Kid, let me tell you: I am the Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack (Buddhist) monk] Shuo Bude; the one behind us is the Tieguan Daoren Zhang Zhong. The one speaking down below is Zhou Dian. The three of us, plus the Leng Mian Xiansheng [Mr. Cold Face] Leng Qian and Peng Yingyu, Peng Heshang [monk Peng], we are the Ming Cult's Wu San Ren [Five Wanderers]. Do you know the Ming Cult?"

"I do," Zhang Wuji replied, "Turns out Dashi [reverend] is also Ming Cult member."

"Leng Qian and I do not kill people too often," Shou Bude continued, "But Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, Peng Heshang, they usually kill people without batting their eyelids. If they knew you are hiding inside my 'Universe Air Pocket', they might pounce on you just for fun and then you'll become minced meat."

Zhang Wuji said, "I have never offended your honorable Cult, why ..."

Shuo Bude cut him off, "When Tieguan Daoren and the others kill people, do you think they would ask first whether you have offended them or not? From now on, if you still want to be alive, do not say even a single word from inside my sack. Do you understand?"

Zhang Wuji nodded.

"Why you don't answer me?" Shuo Bude asked.

"You told me not to say even a single word," Zhang Wuji replied.

Shuo Bude smiled. "It's good if you know that ..." he said, "Ah, what happened to Wei Xiong?" The last sentence was directed toward Zhou Dian.

Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Dian's hoarse and throaty voice, "He ... he ... the disaster has reached its peak."

"Hmm," Shuo Bude said, "Wei Xiong's chest is still a bit warm. Zhou Dian, was it you who helped him?"

"B**lsh*t," Zhou Dian said, "Do you think it was he who helped me?"

"Zhou Dian," Priest Tieguan said, "Are you injured?"

"I saw the blood-sucking bat was lying stiffly by the roadside," Zhou Dian replied, "He was so frozen that he was not even breathing. Contrary to my nature, I showed him the kindness of my heart and transferred my 'chi' to help him. Who would have thought that the cold poison inside the blood-sucking bat was so fierce that this is what happened."

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude said, "This time you indeed have done a good deed."

"What good deed or bad deed?" Zhou Dian said, "This blood-sucking bat is not only ruthless, he is also very strange. Usually I don't like to see his face, but this time he has done something very much to Zhou Dian's liking, so Zhou Dian decided to help him this time. Who would have thought that this blood-sucking bat is incorrigible? The cold poison inside his body attacked me instead and wanted to take Zhou Dian's old life."

Priest Tieguan was startled. "Your injury is that heavy?" he asked.

"Retribution, retribution," Zhou Dian said, "The blood-sucking bat and Zhou Dian have never done any good things in all our lives, and now by doing one good thing we brought disaster to our own lives." "What kind of good thing did Wei Xiong do?" Shuo Bude asked.

Zhou Dian replied, "Whenever he excites the poison inside his body, the cold poison flares up and he has to suck someone's blood to suppress the poison. There was clearly a baby girl by his side, but he would rather die than sucking her blood. Zhou Dian was surprised, so he said, 'Aiyo, not right! The blood-sucking bat is doing something against his nature. Zhou Dian better also do an act of sacrilege by trying to save him.'"

Hearing that Wei Yixiao did not suck Zhu'er's blood, Zhang Wuji's delight was not light. Shuo Bude slapped the sack with the back of his hand while asking, "Who is that baby girl?"

"That's what I asked the blood-sucking bat," Zhou Dian replied, "He said she is Bai Mei Lao Er's [Second Old White Brow] granddaughter. He said presently the Ming Cult is facing a disaster, everybody must be united in a concerted effort; therefore, he must never suck her blood."

Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan applauded together. "That must be so," they said, "If White Eagle and Green Bat, two Kings join hands, the power of the Ming Cult will rise."

Shuo Bude took Wei Yixiao from Zhou Dian; he was shocked. "His body is ice-cold," he said, "What can we do?"

"That's right," Zhou Dian said, "I'll say it's too soon for the two of you to be happy. The blood-sucking bat's old life has 90% gone. One dead bat joins hands with the Bai Mei Ying Wang; what good does it bring to the Ming Cult?"

"You two wait here," Priest Tieguan said, "I am going down the mountain to find a living person and let Wei Xiong drink his fill of fresh human blood." Finished speaking, he stood up at once, ready to jump down the mountain.

"Wait!" Zhou Dian called out, "Mixed-up hair Tieguan, this place is so remote. By the time you find a living person, Wei Yixiao [one laugh] has already turned into Wei Buxiao [not laughing]. If a dead man can laugh, that is too scary. Shuo Bude, you'd better take the kid inside your cloth sack out, let Wei Xiong eat him."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Turns out they already knew I am hidden inside this cloth sack."

"That won't do!" Shuo Bude said, "This kid has shown great kindness toward our Cult. If Wei Xiong ate him, the Five-Element Flags would not let Wei Xiong keep his old life." Thereupon he briefly told them how Zhang Wuji had received three palm strikes from Miejue Shitai in order to save the remaining several dozens of Rui Jin Flag people. "Therefore," he concluded, "Do you think the Five-Element Flags would easily give this kid up?"

Priest Tieguan asked, "You are keeping this precious commodity inside your sack; are you going to use him to subdue the Five-Element Flags?"

"Can't say [Shuo Bude], can't say!" Shuo Bude said, "In short, currently our Cult is disintegrating and is in the face of a great catastrophe. The Heavenly Eagle Cult has come from

afar to render their assistance. Unfortunately they are fighting with the Five-Element Flags over an old account; each one was completely routed by the other. All of us must join hands if we want to avoid destruction. The kid inside my sack will be beneficial to the unity of our Cult's various factions and troops; I have no doubt about it." Speaking to this point, he reached out toward Wei Yixiao's back and stuck his palm on the 'Ling Tai' [spirit platform] acupoint, and sent out his 'chi' to help him resist the cold poison.

Zhou Dian sighed, "Shuo Bude," he said, "It is great that you want to sell your life for your friend, but please be careful for your own old life."

"Let me also help," Priest Tieguan said. He stretched out his right hand and joined his palm with Shuo Bude's left palm. Together two streams of internal energy burst into Wei Yixiao's body.

About the time needed to cook rice later, Wei Yixiao started to groan weakly and came to his senses, but his teeth were still chattering; it was obvious that the cold was extreme. With a shivering voice he said, "Zhou Dian, Tieguan Dao Xiong [Taoist brother], thank you for your help." He did not thank Shuo Bude, because the two of them were good friends; verbal gratitude would be superfluous instead.

Priest Tieguan's internal energy was deep, but against the cold poison inside the Wei Yixiao's body, he had to exert everything he had to overcome it that momentarily he was not able to speak. Shuo Bude was not any better.

Suddenly several notes of a 'qin' [zither] floated over from the eastern side of the peak, intermingled with a clear sound of a whistle. "Mr. Leng Mian and Peng Heshang have arrived," Zhou Dian said. Raising his voice, he called out, "Leng Mian

Xiansheng, Peng Heshang, somebody's injured. Roll over here quickly!"

From the other side the 'qin' responded with one clear note. Monk Peng asked, "Who ... is ... injured ...?" The voice came from quite a distant away; it echoed over the valley. Successively he asked several questions: "Who is injured? Is Shuo Bude all right? How about Tieguan Xiong [brother]? Zhou Dian, why is your voice lacking some 'chi'?" With each sentence he uttered, he got closer by several 'zhang', hence by the time he finished his strings of questions, he was close enough to them.

"Aiyo!" he said in shock, "It's Wei Yixiao!"

"You are always flustered," Zhou Dian said, "Always the first in the world to be anxious. Leng Mian Xiong, why don't you think of a way to help?" The last sentence was obviously directed toward Mr. Cold Face, Leng Qian.

"Hmm," Leng Qian grunted, but did not say anything. He knew Monk Peng would definitely ask for more details, so he could save himself some energy. And indeed, question after question did not stop gushing out of Monk Peng's mouth. Zhou Dian's explanation was a bit disorderly, but by the time he finished his story, Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan were able to regulate their 'chi'. Monk Peng and Leng Qian also transferred their internal energy to separately help Wei Yixiao and Zhou Dian to overcome the cold poison.

After Wei Yixiao and Zhou Dian's vitalities are slightly recovered, Monk Peng said, "I came from the northeast direction, and learned that Shaolin Pai Zhang Men [Sect Leader] Kong Wen is personally leading Shidi [younger martial brother] Kong Zhi and Kong Xing, along with more than a hundred disciples of various generations, has just

arrived at the Brightness Peak to take part in the besieging of our Cult.”

“Due east,” Leng Qian said, “The Five Heroes of Wudang!” He always spoke succinctly; even if his head was cut, he would not want to say even half an extra word. He only said these six characters [‘zheng dong, wudang wu xia’], but his meaning was, ‘The Five Heroes of Wudang have arrived to attack from the east direction.’ As for who were the Five Heroes of Wudang, everybody knew they were Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting and Mo Shenggu; hence did not need to waste his breath to explain.

Monk Peng said, “The Six Sects are advancing separately to mount a join attack, gradually closing in on us. The Five-Element Flags have been engaged in a number of battles. The situation seems to be very disadvantageous to our side. In my opinion, we need to be at the Brightness Peak ahead of the enemy.”

“You are releasing your Mama’s smelly fart!” Zhou Dian angrily said, “That fellow Yang Xiao did not come to seek help from us, would the Wu San Ren come uninvited?”

“Zhou Dian,” Monk Peng said, “Suppose that the Six Major Sects succeed in breaking through the Brightness Peak and extinguish the Sacred Fire, can we still live as human beings? Of course Yang Xiao did offend the Wu San Ren, but we are helping to guard the Brightness Peak, absolutely not for Yang Xiao’s sake, but for the Ming Cult.”

“Peng Heshang is right,” Shuo Bude also expressed his opinion, “Although Yang Xiao was rude to us, protecting the Cult is more important than our personal grudges.”

“Fart, fart!” Zhou Dian cursed and swore, “Two bald donkeys

[derogatory term to call Buddhist monks] are farting together, the stench reeks out to the high heaven. Tieguan Daoren, Yang Xiao shattered your left shoulder in the past, don't you remember?"

Priest Tieguan was silent for half a day before answering, "Protecting the Cult against the enemy is a big matter. We will settle the account with Yang Xiao after the enemy is repelled. When that time arrives, with the Wu San Ren join hands, I am not afraid this fellow will refuse to bow his head."

"Humph," Zhou Dian snorted. "Leng Qian, what do you say?" he asked.

"We go together!" Leng Qian said.

"You also submit to Yang Xiao?" Zhou Dian mocked, "Don't you remember we made a heavy oath, saying that we, the Wu San Ren, from now on would leave our hands in our sleeves and would not pay any attention to the affair of the Ming Cult? Are you saying that our oath was merely a fart?"

"It was merely a fart!" Leng Qian said.

Zhou Dian was angry; he sprang up and said, "Everybody is farting! Mine is the only human's words."

Priest Tieguan said, "We still have time; let us hurry to the Brightness Peak!"

"Dian Xiong [brother Dian]," Monk Peng persuaded, "Because we were fighting over the Jiaozhu position in the past, we became enemies to each other. Yang Xiao is admittedly narrow-minded, but if we think carefully, the Wu San Ren are not without fault ..."

"Nonsense!" Zhou Dian was furious, "No one among the Wu San Ren was dreaming to become the Jiaozhu; what did we do wrong?"

Shuo Bude said, "Even if we fight for a year or a year and a half longer, we would still be unable to clear up our Cult's past argument of right and wrong. Zhou Dian, let me ask you this: are you or are you not a disciple of 'Ming Zun Huo Sheng' [The Bright Prophet of the Holy Fire]?"

"Do you have to even question that fact?" Zhou Dian said.

Shuo Bude said, "Today a great disaster is looming above our Cult's head; if we keep our hands inside our sleeves, after we die, do we have a face to see 'Ming Zun' and Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang]? If you are scared of the Six Major Sects, you can stay here. We are going to the Brightness Peak to join the battle and die for our Cult. You may come later to bury our bones!"

Zhou Dian leaped up and struck Shuo Bude's face with his palm, while cursing, "Fart!"

'Slap!' Shuo Bude endured the heavy strike quietly. Slowly he opened his mouth and spat out several teeth; not a single word came out of his mouth. His cheek from white turned to red, from red turned dark scarlet and grew bigger.

Monk Peng and the others were stunned. Zhou Dian was even more shocked. Actually, Shuo Bude and Zhou Dian's martial art skills were almost on par with each other. When Zhou Dian casually sent out his palm, if he wanted to, he could parry or dodged; either way, Zhou Dian's palm would definitely not hit him. Who would have thought that he took the beating without doing anything? Consequently, his injury was not light.

Zhou Dian was filled with remorse. "Shuo Bude," he called out, "Hit me back! If you don't, you are not a human."

Shuo Bude smiled wryly and said, "My energy is reserved to fight the enemy. Why would I want to hit a friend?"

Zhou Dian was angry; he raised his palm and heavily struck his own face. 'Slap!' he also spat several teeth out.

Monk Peng was startled. "Zhou Dian," he said, "What are you doing?"

Zhou Dian angrily replied, "I shouldn't have struck Shuo Bude. I told him to hit me back, he did not want to, so I have to do it myself."

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude said, "You and I are like brothers. The four of us are going to risk our lives in a battle on the Brightness Peak, we might part forever. What harm does it bring to let you hit me with a palm?"

Zhou Dian's heart was deeply touched. He shouted with a cry in his voice, "I'm also going to the Brightness Peak. Yang Xiao's old debt, let me set aside for the time being."

Monk Peng was delighted. "Now that is a good brother!" he said.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was able to hear everybody clearly. He thought, "These five men are highly skilled martial art experts; there is no doubt about it. What's hard to come by is their chivalrous brotherhood. There are not a few experts within the Ming Cult; is it possible that all of them are heretical and demonic?"

While he was still deep in thought, suddenly he felt he was being moved; so he knew Shuo Bude was taking him to the Brightness Peak. Ever since he learned that Zhu'er was all right, he was relieved; his only concern right now was the Six Major Sects of Wulin world besieging the Ming Cult; how was he going to bring this matter to conclusion? He also thought that when he got to the Brightness Peak, he would see his childhood friend, Yang Buhui. After she grew up, would she still remember him?

The party travelled for a day and a night. Once every several hours, Shuo Bude would untie the mouth of the sack to let Zhang Wuji had some fresh air before he would tightly tie the sack again. By afternoon the next day, Zhang Wuji suddenly felt the sack was being dragged over the rugged ground. At first he did not understand, but later when he slightly raised his head, his forehead bumped heavily into a rock that it hurt like hell. Now he realized that they were walking along a tunnel inside the mountain. The tunnel was unusually cold, the air was not moving freely. After walking for the more than an hour, they were out of the belly of the mountain. Then they walked along an ascending path. But before long, they entered another tunnel.

After going through five such tunnels, Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Dian call out, "Yang Xiao, the blood-sucking bat and the Wu San Ren are here to see you!"

Half a day later, came the reply from some distance ahead, "What a pleasant surprise Fu Wang and the Wu San Ren honor me with your presence. Yang Xiao did not welcome you from afar, for which offense I beg your forgiveness."

"What a hypocritical nonsense are you blabbering about?" Zhou Dian said, "In your belly you must be cursing the Wu San Ren's words were like a fart; we said that we would never go up the Brightness Peak, we would forever pay no attention

to the Ming Cult's affair, yet today we come for a visit uninvited."

"The Six Major Sects are besieging us from all sides, Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] is unable to cope with it alone, and am very anxious," Yang Xiao replied, "That Fu Wang and the Wu San Ren are looking at Ming Zun's face and come to offer your help for the sake of loyalty, it is indeed our Cult's good fortune."

"It's good if you know that," Zhou Dian said.

Immediately Yang Xiao welcomed the Five Wanderers into the inner chamber, where a boy servant delivered tea and refreshments.

"Aaahhh!" suddenly the servant cried miserably. Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was absolutely horrified for not knowing what happened. After quite a while, he heard Wei Yixiao say, "Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary Yang], I am sorry to harm your servant. Wei Yixiao will pay you back someday."

His voice was full of vigor; entirely different from when he was gasping for breath previously. Zhang Wuji shivered inwardly. "He sucked this servant's blood," he mused, "Now his cold poison is under control."

He heard Yang Xiao flatly say, "What's pay back or not pay back between us? That Fu Wang is willing to come to the Brightness Peak shows that you regard me in high esteem."

These seven people were the Ming Cult's top fighters, masters who are the sharpest-tip-of-the-weapon; although presently they were facing a powerful enemy, once they gathered together, their spirits rose. After food and drink, they discussed ideas on how to resist the enemy. Shuo Bude

placed the cloth sack next to his feet. Zhang Wuji was hungry and thirsty, but remembering Shuo Bude's warning, he did not dare to either move or make any noise.

After a lengthy discussion, Monk Peng said, "Guang Ming You Shi [the Right Emissary of the Brightness] and Zi Shan Long Wang [Purple-robe Dragon King] have gone missing; whether Jin Mao Shi Wang is alive or dead is also hard to foretell, so we might as well forget about them. The most unfortunate matter at the moment is that the enmity between the Five-Element Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Cult is getting deeper and deeper. During the most recent battle, both sides have suffered quite heavy casualties. If only the two of them can also go up the Brightness Peak and join forces to resist the enemy, not only siege of Six Major Sects, even twelve sects or eighteen sects, the Ming Cult would be able to counter soldiers with arms, water with earth wall."

Shuo Bude lightly kicked the cloth sack and said, "The kid inside this sack is somewhat related to the Heavenly Eagle Cult; recently, he also showed great kindness to the Five-Element Flags. Perhaps he will play an important role in the resolution of bilateral animosity in the future."

Wei Yixiao coldly said, "One more day the Jiaozhu position is undecided, one more day our Cult's dispute is not resolved. Even if he has ability as big as the sky, he will never resolve this hostility. Yang Zuo Shi, 'zaixia' [humble one] wants to ask you something: after the enemy is repelled, whom will you support to be our leader?"

Yang Xiao unenthusiastically said, "Whoever possesses the Sheng Huo Ling [command or decree of the holy fire] I will support to be our Jiaozhu. This has been our Cult's custom since the days of our ancestors; why did you ask me?"

Wei Yixiao said, "Sheng Huo Ling has been lost for nearly a hundred years; are you telling me that as long as Sheng Huo Ling is not found, the Ming Cult will not have a Jiaozhu? The Six Major Sects have the guts to besiege the Brightness Peak; they have complete disregard for our Cult. It is all because they know our Cult has lost our line of command, we are disintegrating internally."

"Wei Xiong is right," Shuo Bude said, "I, Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk], am not of the Yin faction, neither am I of the Wei faction; whoever become the Jiaozhu is fine with me, as long as there is a Jiaozhu. Even if we do not have a Jiaozhu, a Vice Jiaozhu is also fine. Without a clear chain of command, how can we thwart the intrusion of the enemy?"

Priest Tiguan said, "Shuo Bude's words attain my heart."

Yang Xiao's face changed. "Gentlemen," he said, "Do you come up the Brightness Peak to help me to fight the enemy, or to make things difficult for me?"

Zhou Dian laughed aloud. "Yang Xiao," he said, "Do you think I, Zhou Dian, do not know your real intention on why you do not want to elect a Jiaozhu? As long as the Ming Cult does not have a Jiaozhu, it will be you, the Left Emissary, who presides over the interim position. Humph, however, although your position is the highest, if others do not obey your order, then what good will it bring? Can you command the Five-Element Flag? Will the Four Great Hu Jiao Fa Wang submit to you? We, the Five Wanderers, are like floating clouds and wild cranes, don't even give a damn to some Guang Ming Zuo Shi!"

Yang Xiao stood up abruptly. In a cold voice he said, "Today the enemy is outside, ready to strike; Yang Xiao does not have time to engage gentlemen in a battle of words. If

gentlemen willingly watch with folded arms the Ming Cult's life or death, then please go down the Brightness Peak! As long as Yang Xiao does not die, I will return your visit one by one in the future."

"Yang Zuo Shi, you don't need to lose your temper," Monk Peng exhorted, "The Six Major Sects are besieging the Ming Cult. It is the duty of each and every one of the Cult disciple to defend our Cult. It is not your business alone."

With a cold laugh Yang Xiao said, "I am afraid there are people within our Cult who are hoping that Yang Xiao will be slain by the Six Major Sects, and thus they will be rid of the nail in their eyes."

"Whom are you referring to?" Zhou Dian asked.

Yang Xiao replied, "Every body knows his own heart; must I spell it out?"

"Are you talking about me?" Zhou Dian angrily asked.

Yang Xiao averted his gaze to someplace else; he was ignoring Zhou Dian completely. Monk Peng saw Zhou Dian's eyes radiated a different gleam; apparently he was ready to fight with Yang Xiao, he quickly urged, "There is an ancient saying: brothers fight each other, outsiders will drive their insult. Let us discuss further our plan to fight the enemy."

Yang Xiao said, "Yingyu Dashi [Reverend Yingyu] understands the important matter, your words are very true."

"Fine!" Zhou Dian shouted loudly, "Bald thief Peng understands the important matter, Zhou Dian only knows trivial matter?" He was just being mule-headed; he did not want to consider anything. Still shouting, he said, "I want this Jiaozhu position to be decided today. Zhou Dian nominates

Wei Yixiao as the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. The blood-sucking bat's martial art skill is superb, in terms of scheming he is shrewd. Nobody in our Cult is superior to him."

Actually, in normal times, Zhou Dian and Wei Yixiao had never been close friends; there were more ill will between them than there was goodwill. But he deliberately wanted to provoke Yang Xiao, so he pushed Wei Yixiao forward.

Yang Xiao laughed. "In my opinion," he said, "It would be best if the Jiaozhu position is held by Zhou Dian. Currently the Ming Cult is all split up in pieces. If we have Great Cult Leader Zhou to preside at the top, our Cult will be turned upside down. Now, that should be very interesting!" [Translator's note: This is one of those 'lost in translation' cases. Yang Xiao was playing with Zhou Dian's name: the character 'Dian' means 'top (of the head)' or 'apex'; but it also means 'fall forward, upside down, or jolt'.]

Zhou Dian was furious. "Your Mama's dog stinky fart!" he shouted. 'Whoosh!' his palm struck down on the crown of Yang Xiao's head.

A while ago, Zhou Dian's palm had caused many of Shuo Bude's teeth fall down; it was because Shuo Bude had no intention to evade. But how could Yang Xiao receive such treatment easily? More than ten years ago, because of a dispute over a Cult affair, Yang Xiao had a major argument with the Five Wanderers. At that time, the Five Wanderers made an oath not to go up the Brightness Peak again. When they broke their heavy oath by coming today, suspicions had started to grow inside Yang Xiao's heart. Seeing Zhou Dian suddenly make his move, he knew that the Five Wanderers had made an agreement with Wei Yixiao to come and conspire against him. Startled and angered, his right palm swept out to meet Zhou Dian's palm.

Wei Yixiao knew Yang Xiao's capability very well. After Zhou Dian was injured, his 'chi' had not recovered; he was definitely not Yang Xiao's match. Thereupon Wei Yixiao dashed ahead of him with swept palm to receive Yang Xiao's palm. The two palms collided, but surprisingly no noise was to be heard. Turned out although Yang Xiao had reasons to dislike Zhou Dian, he still remembered that both of them belonged to the same Cult; therefore, he was unwilling to harm his life. Consequently, his palm did not carry his full strength. However, Wei Yixiao's martial art skill was deep; as his stance 'han bing mian zhang' [cold ice soft palm] arrived, Yang Xiao's right arm was shaken, as he felt a burst of cold 'yin' energy penetrated his skin and flesh; hastily he exerted his internal energy to withstand. When the two men's internal energy collided, they were locked at a stalemate.

"The one surnamed Yang," Zhou Dian called out, "Eat my palm again!" Just now his first palm did not hit its target, now his second palm was aimed at Yang Xiao's chest.

"Zhou Dian, don't make a scene!" Shuo Bude called out.

Monk Peng also said, "Yang Zuo Shi, Wei Fu Wang, please hold your hands, don't harm our own people!" He stretched out his hand to divert Zhou Dian's palm. But Yang Xiao's body leaned sideways, his left palm already met and stuck on Zhou Dian's right palm.

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude called out, "You are two against one, what kind of hero are you?" Reaching out toward Zhou Dian's shoulder, he wanted to grab him and pull him back. But before his hand even touched Zhou Dian, he saw Zhou Dian's body slightly shiver as if he had already received internal injury. Shuo Bude was shocked. He knew very well the Left Emissary of the Brightness' divine power; he was their Cult's

top master. Shuo Bude was afraid that in that one palm strike, Yang Xiao had already injured Zhou Dian. He saw Zhou Dian's right palm was stuck onto Yang Xiao's left palm, as if he was not willing to withdraw his palm.

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude called out, "We are all brothers, why would you disregard your own old life?" He came closer to pull Zhou Dian's shoulder, while at the same time said, "Yang Zuo Shi, please be lenient with your palm." He was afraid Yang Xiao was unwilling to withdraw his palm strength and took that opportunity to attack him. To his surprise, as he pulled Zhou Dian's body, Zhou Dian swayed but could not move; while at the same time a burst of ice-cold 'chi' penetrated his palm and went straight toward the pit of his stomach.

Shuo Bude was even more shocked; thinking, "This is the special skill of Wei Xiong's school, the Cold Ice Soft Palm; how could Yang Xiao also train this skill?" Hastily he exerted his own internal energy to resist the attack. But the cold 'chi' was growing in intensity that in a short period of time Shuo Bude's jaws started to chatter from the unbearable cold.

Priest Tieguan and Peng Yingyu rushed forward; one protected Zhou Dian, the other protected Shuo Bude. With the combined energy of four men, the cold 'chi' was no longer unbearable. They only felt that the force transmitted from Yang Xiao's palm was sometimes light, sometimes heavy, something bursting something sluggish; it kept changing with infinite variation. The four men did not dare to withdraw their palms, for fear that as soon as their power slackened, Yang Xiao would sent out his power suddenly and then the four of them would either be dead or at least suffer serious injury.

"Yang Zuo Shi," Peng Yingyu called out, "We are facing

powerful enemy; how can you ... can you ... can you ...” His teeth chattered so much that he was unable to continue. He felt as if the blood in his entire body had frozen to ice. Turned out as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the real ‘chi’ in his body stopped momentarily that he was unable to withstand the cold ‘chi’ coming in from his palm.

And so for the next time needed to drink a cup of tea later, Mr. Cold Face Leng Qian stood on the side watching. He noticed that the faces of Wei Yixiao and his four fellow Wanderers were tight, but Yang Xiao seemed to be at ease; he felt very strange. “Although Yang Xiao’s martial art skill is high,” he thought, “Compared to Wei Yixiao, he is about the same, he won’t necessarily be able to defeat him easily. With the addition of Shuo Bude and the others, four men, Yang Xiao is absolutely not their match. Why is it that with one against five, he still looks like he is so confident of victory? There must be something strange going on here ...”

Hanging his head, he pondered deeply, but failed to solve the puzzle immediately. He heard Zhou Dian call out, “Leng Mian devil, strike ... strike his back ... strike ...” But Leng Qian was unwilling to make his move before he has a clear understanding of what was happening. Right now, among the Five Wanderers, he was the only one who was not doing anything; they would depend solely on him to escape the danger and get away from distress. However, supposing he also stakes everything he had to battle Yang Xiao, although with the addition of one man their combined power would be increased quite a bit, they still could not ascertain their victory.

He saw that the faces of Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu had turned blue; it looked like if this situation continued, the ‘yin’ poison would enter their internal organs, and then they would face endless disaster. Thereupon he took out from his

pocket five small sterling silver writing brushes and held them in his hand while he said, “Five brushes, strike your ‘qu chi’ [crooked reservoir], ‘ju gu’ [gigantic bone], ‘yang huo’ [positive orifice], ‘wu li’ [five interior(?)], ‘zhong du’ [middle capital].” These five acupoints were located on hands and feet, really were not fatal acupoints at all. He mentioned the target first, apparently so that Yang Xiao would know that he did not have any malicious intention, just wanted him to withdraw his palms.

Yang Xiao showed a faint smile, but did not take any notice of him. Leng Qian called out, “Forgive my offense!” With a tossing motion on his left hand and scattering motion on the right, five silver rays shot toward Yang Xiao.

Yang Xiao waited until the five silver brushes came near, then abruptly his left hand swept horizontally, pulling along Zhou Dian and the others, four people, using them as a shield in front of his body. Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu uttered a stifled grunt as the five brushes separately landed on these two men’s bodies; Zhou Dian received two brushes, while Peng Yingyu was hit by three brushes. Luckily Leng Qian had no intention to hurt anybody; the force of his hands was very light, plus the pens did not actually hit the intended acupoints. Although they suffered flesh wound, they were not seriously harmed.

“It’s ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi!’ [‘qian kun’ – heaven and earth, yin and yang, the universe; ‘da’ – big/great; ‘nuo’ – to shift, to move; ‘yi’ – also to shift, to move, to change/alter/remove. The Great Shifting of the Universe]” in a low voice Peng Yingyu said.

As soon as Leng Qian heard the five characters ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’, he understood immediately. ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’ was the fiercest martial art skill, a Ming Cult’s legacy, passed on

from generation to the generation. The fundamental principle was not mysterious at all; it strove to stimulate one's own potential first, and then used it to lead and shift the opponent's force. But the variations within this principle were magical; it was almost unthinkable.

Ever since the death of the previous Cult Leader, Yang Dingtian, there was no one else within the Ming Cult who mastered this special skill, and thus none of the six men ever expected it. No wonder Yang Xiao did not seem to exert himself, since he simply directed Wei Yixiao's palm power to attack the four Wanderers, and conversely, used the four Wanderers' palm power to attack Wei Yixiao, while he leisurely positioned himself in between them, no more than drawing and transmitting both parties' internal energy, nothing more than 'parting the mountain to watch tigers fight'.

"Congratulations!" Leng Qian said, "No ill will, please stop fighting." He always spoke succinctly. With 'congratulations', he congratulated Yang Xiao on being successfully trained in the Ming Cult's long lost divine skill, the 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi'; by 'no ill will' he was saying that we, six people, going up the mountain this time without holding any ill will toward you, that we were sincere in our desire to help resisting the invaders; and by 'please stop fighting' he meant both sides should stop fighting and must not have any misunderstanding.

Yang Xiao was aware that in normal times Leng Qian had never uttered a single rubbish talk; and because he did not want to utter even one extraneous word, he had never told a lie. If he said, 'no ill will', then he truly did not have any evil intention. Moreover, when he made his move by shooting the five silver brushes, it was obvious that his intention was indeed to help his companions out of trouble, not to harm

anybody. Thereupon he laughed and said, "Wei Xiong, Four Wanderers, when I say 'one, two, three', everybody remove your palm power at the same time, so that nobody will get hurt!"

Seeing Wei Yixiao, Zhou Dian and the others nodded their heads, he slowly counted, "One, two, three!"

As the word 'three' left his mouth, Yang Xiao removed the divine skill 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi'; but suddenly he felt his back was cold. A burst of sharp finger power pierced the 'shen dao' [divine way] acupoint on his back. Yang Xiao was shocked. "Fu Wang is very sinister and ruthless," he thought, "To launch a sneak attack like this." But when he was about to counterattack by slapping backward, he saw that Wei Yixiao swayed and tumbled down. It seemed like he had also fallen under the enemy's sneak attack.

In all his life, Yang Xiao had seen countless big battles; although this turn of events had taken him by surprise, his mind stayed clear. Quickly he dashed forward to get away from the enemy's reach. Upon turning his head around, he saw Zhou Dian, Peng Yingyu, Priest Tieguan and Shuo Bude, four people, had also fallen on the ground, while Leng Qian was exchanging palm strikes with someone wearing ash grey cotton robe.

The man struck backhandedly, and Leng Qian uttered a grunt; his voice sounded like he was in pain. Yang Xiao took a deep breath and jumped forward with the intention of helping Leng Qian, but suddenly he felt a burst of ice-cold 'chi' flowed swiftly from his 'shen dao' acupoint to his torso, attacking his 'shen zhu' [body pillar], 'tao dao' [pottery channel], 'da zhui' [big spine], 'feng fu' [windy mansion], and various acupoints along the 'du mai' [supervise arteries] channel.

Yang Xiao knew his condition was far from good. The enemy was not only a martial art expert, but also a sinister and ruthless person; he was able to take the split-second window when Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the four Wanderers were withdrawing their strength and like a lightning he struck a surprise attack. Yang Xiao had no choice but to circulate his own real 'chi' to fight the cold. This cold 'chi' was completely different from Wei Yixiao's Cold Ice Soft Palm. Yang Xiao felt it was like a wisp of ice-cold thread, but wherever it reached, it turned the acupoint numb and itchy. If they were fighting face to face, Yang Xiao could use his internal energy to protect his body, and there was no way this kind of finger power would penetrate his internal defense. But since he had already fallen under the enemy's sneak attack, his only option was to launch a counterattack together with Leng Qian, trying to knock down the enemy then act accordingly.

Yang Xiao stepped forward with raised right palm, and was about to strike down when suddenly his entire body shivered violently from the cold and the strength he gathered in his palm disappeared without a trace.

By this time Leng Qian had exchanged more than twenty stances with that man, and it was obvious that he was not the man's match. Yang Xiao was very anxious. He saw Leng Qian kicked with his right foot. The man rushed one step forward and his finger hacked down on Leng Qian's arm. Leng Qian staggered and fell backward.

Yang Xiao was startled and angered; he gathered the remaining of internal energy in his entire body into his right elbow and struck the grey-robed man on the chest. The grey-robed man stuck out his left finger toward the 'xiao hai' [small ocean] acupoint on Yang Xiao's elbow. Immediately Yang Xiao felt his entire body went cold and numb, and was

not able to make another move, even for half a step.

The grey-robed man laughed coldly and said, "The Guang Ming Zuo Shi indeed lives up to your reputation. After getting hit twice by my 'huan yin zhi' [fantasy/magical 'yin' finger], you can still stand."

Yang Xiao said, "Your finger-flicking technique is from Shaolin, but whatever is the 'huan yin zhi' internal strength? Humph, Shaolin Pai does not have this kind of sinister and ruthless martial art. Who are you?"

The grey-robed man laughed aloud and said, "Pin Seng [impoverished monk] Yuan Zhen, a disciple under the tutelage of my master, whose Buddhist title was 'Kong' at the top and 'Jian' at the bottom. Right now the Six Major Sects are besieging the Ming Cult. You die under a Shaolin disciple, your death is not in vain."

Yang Xiao said, "The Six Major Sects and our Ming Cult are enemies, real swords, real spears, we will fight to the death; that will be the deed of the real man, real hero. Kong Jian Shen Seng's [Divine Monk] kindness and chivalry was widely known throughout the world, who would have thought that among his disciples there is someone as despicable and shameless as you are ..." Speaking to this point, he was unable to stand anymore; his knees gave up and he fell sitting down on the ground.

Yuan Zhen laughed out loud and said, "To win by a surprise move is just fair in a war. It has been this way since the ancient times. I, Yuan Zhen, one man can flatten the Ming Cult's seven big masters. Aren't you going to accept the defeat?"

Yang Xiao shook his head and sighed. "How can you enter the Brightness Peak stealthily?" he asked, "How did you know

about this secret passage? If you are willing to reveal it, Yang Xiao will die with closed eyes." Yang Xiao knew that Yuan Zhen's sneak attack was successful, admittedly it was because his martial art skill was superior; but most importantly, it was because he knew the secret passages of the Brightness Peak, bypassing a dozens of Ming Cult's sentries along the way, and made his move stealthily [orig. shén bù zhī guī bù jué - deity (does) not know, ghost (does) not realize.], so that he was able to knock down seven masters of the Ming Cult in one move.

The Ming Cult had been operating from the Brightness Peak as their headquarters for hundreds of years, relying on dangerous precipice as their natural defense, enforced with metal ramparts and impassable moats. Who would have thought that disaster arose from the inside; it came so suddenly that there was not enough time to set up a defense? Indeed they had suffered a crushing defeat.

A phrase from the 'Lun Yu' [Analects of Confucius] suddenly came to Yang Xiao's mind: Kong Zi [Confucius] said, 'In his own territory there are divisions and downfalls, leavings and separations, and, with your help, he cannot preserve it. And yet he is planning these hostile movements within the state.- I am afraid that the sorrow of the Ji-sun family will not be on account of Zhuan-yu, but will be found within the screen of their own court.' [This is not my translation, I found it here: <http://classics.mit.edu//Confucius/analects.html> under Section 4, Part 16, edited to pinyin spellings.]

Yuan Zhen said with a laugh, "You, Devil Cult, always regarded the seven peaks and thirteen cliffs of the Brightness Peak as a natural defense. In our Shaolin monks' eyes, it is no more than a broad and open road, is it not? All of you have been hit by my 'huan yin zhi', I have no doubt that within three days, you will return to the Western

Paradise. In my visit to the Peak this time, Pin Seng has buried several dozen catties of gunpowder. I will extinguish the Devil Cult's devil fire. When the Heavenly Eagle Cult, the Five-Element Flags, and what have you, busily going up to rescue, 'ka-boom', the buried gunpowder will explode. Smoke will arise, fire will be out, from then on, you can consider the Devil Cult vanished without a trace. This is what it is called: The lone Shaolin monk extinguishes the Ming Cult, the seven demons of the Brightness Peak return to the Western Paradise."

Listening to this, Yang Xiao and the others could not help from feeling extremely anxious, knowing that this monk was capable of doing what he said he would do. The loss of their own lives was not to be regretted, but the Ming Cult, which had been passed on for thirty three generations, would perish under this Shaolin monk's hands.

In the meantime, Yuan Zhen was growing more and more complacent. "Within the Ming Cult, the masters are as numerous as the clouds. If you did not fight each other and disintegrate to pieces, how could there be any disastrous destruction? Just look at what happened today: if the seven of you were not in the middle of staking everything in palm power competition, how could Pin Seng quietly go up the Brightness Peak, and succeed in one strike? This is called: the Heaven regards sin yet still allow man to live, but the more sin committed, man must not live! Ha ha ha ... I can't believe the Ming Cult, with its awe-inspiring prestige in the former days, will end up like this after Yang Dingtian's death."

In the brink of great disaster of their own death, as well as the destruction of their Cult, as Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu, Zhou Dian, and the others heard his words, they recalled the incidents happened over the last twenty years, and were all

filled with deep regret. "This monk is right," they thought.

"Yang Xiao," with a loud voice Zhou Dian said, "I, Zhou Dian, really deserve to die! I was being unfair toward you. Although you are not too good, you being the Jiaozhu certainly beat us without any Jiaozhu at all, and so we won't be completely wiped out like this."

With a bitter laugh Yang Xiao replied, "What ability do I have to become the Jiaozhu? Everybody was in the wrong; we have made such a huge mess that in the netherworld we won't have a face to see the past generations' Jiaozhu."

Yuan Zhen laughed. "It is too late for you, gentlemen, to regret it now," he said. "When Yang Dingtian was the boss of the Devil Cult, he was insufferably arrogant. It's a pity he died early and could not witness the defeat of the Ming Cult with his own eyes."

"Fart!" Zhou Dian angrily said, "If Yang Jiaozhu were still alive, everybody would obey his orders! How can a bald thief like you launch a sneak attack like this?"

With a cold laugh Yuan Zhen said, "It doesn't matter if Yang Dingtian is dead or alive. I will always have a way to have his reputation swept away ..."

Suddenly a slap was heard, followed by a cry, "Ah!" Yuan Zhen's back was hit by Wei Yixiao's palm, while Wei Yixiao was also hit by Yuan Zhen's counterattack finger strike, right on the 'shan zhong' [lit. mutton smell] acupoint on his chest. Both of them staggered a few steps backward.

When Wei Yixiao was hit by Yuan Zhen's finger earlier, although his injury was heavy, his internal energy was, after all, a notch higher than the others. Only he did not

immediately strike back, but pretended to be knocked out instead. When Yuan Zhen was getting immensely pleased with himself and not in the least on guard, he leaped up and attacked. He had sent out his entire strength in this one palm strike. He was willing to die together with the enemy to save the Ming Cult from a calamity.

Although Yuan Zhen was fierce, the Green-winged Bat King was one of the Ming Cult's 'Hu Jiao Fa Wang', he shared the same honor with Yin Tianzheng and Xie Xun. When he struck with everything he had, how could it be considered a small matter? As soon as the power of 'Cold Ice Soft Palm' entered his body, Yuan Zhen felt his stomach turn upside down that he wanted to throw up. He tried to circulate his internal energy to steady himself, but he still felt the sky spun and the earth revolved that he felt he was about to fall down. He had no choice but sit cross-legged and circulate his 'chi' to resist the cold attack from the 'Cold Ice Soft Palm'.

As Wei Yixiao got hit by the 'Fantastical Yin Finger' twice in succession, he could not stand and fell backward and was not able to move. Immediately the hall became quiet as the eight martial art masters all received heavy injuries; nobody was able to make even half a step of movement.

Eight men exerted their internal energies, each was hoping he could restore his strength one step earlier than the enemy. If only one side was able to move, he could kill the other side. Everybody was anxious in his heart. They all knew it was the decisive moment for the survival or destruction of the Ming Cult, as well as the live or death of all eight people. If Yuan Zhen was able to move first, despite his heavy injury, he would be able to pick up a sword and murder these seven people one by one. If only one of the seven Ming Cult people was able to move first, he would be able to kill Yuan Zhen and thus save the Ming Cult.

There were seven people in Ming Cult's side, they should have the benefit of numbers; however, the Five Wanderers' power was comparably shallower than the rest. When they were hit by the 'Fantastical Yin Finger', their strength was gone; while Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, who possessed more profound internal strength were hit twice. Actually, it was not easy to differentiate the power of 'han bing mian zhang' and 'huan yin zhi'; however, Wei Yixiao sent his last palm strike when he had already suffered injury, while Yuan Zhen launched his attack when he had not been injured. It could be gathered from this fact that Yuan Zhen had a greater chance to make his move first.

Yang Xiao and the others were secretly distressed, but circulating internal energy to treat injury like this must not be forced the least bit; the more they were anxious and impatient, the greater the chance of something going terribly wrong. Each one of these people was an expert in internal energy cultivation; how could they not know this fact?

Leng Qian and the others vomited several times. They knew they would never be able to recover ahead of Yuan Zhen. They only hoped for one of Yang Xiao's subordinates at the Brightness Peak would come into the hall. As long as one Ming Cult disciple came in, - he did not have to know martial art - he could pick a wooden stick and gently knock Yuan Zhen and kill him. However, after waiting for a long time, there was not even half a noise could be heard outside the hall. It was close to midnight, the disciples at the Brightness Peak were either on their guard duties outside, or were sleeping in their quarters inside. Besides, without Yang Xiao's order, who would dare to barge into the hall? As for Yang Xiao's servants, ever since one of them was bitten by Wei Yixiao to death, they all scared out of their wits and had scattered away early on. Not to mention Yang Xiao did not

summon them, even if he did, they might not necessarily dare to step into the hall, to come to the presence of this blood-sucking Devil King.

Hidden inside the cloth sack, Zhang Wuji could not see anything, but when they spoke, he could hear every single word clearly. Right now the hall was quiet, but he knew that this silence was hiding an enormous murderous intention. After half a day, suddenly he heard Shuo Bude's voice was calling out, "Hey, little friend inside the cloth sack, you must save us."

"How do I save you?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The flow of 'chi' in Yuan Zhen's 'dan tian' was starting to clear up. To suddenly hear a voice came out of the cloth sack, his shock was not light. His real 'chi' was shaken and his body was trembling violently. Ever since he entered the hall, his attention was focused on dealing with Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, and the other masters; how could he find the time to leisurely observe anything unusual lying on the ground other than an ordinary cloth sack? To suddenly hear someone was talking, he could not restrain from sucking a mouthful of cold air while cried out inwardly, "I am finished!"

He heard Shuo Bude say, "The mouth of the cloth sack was bound by the 'qian chan bai jie' [a thousand wraps a hundred knots] technique. Other than myself, definitely nobody else would be able to untie it. But you can stand up."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, while standing inside the cloth sack.

"Xiao Xiongdi [little brother]," Shuo Bude said, "You were willing to give up your life to save the lives of several dozen Rui Jin Flag brethren, your righteousness, chivalry and noble

character deserves everybody's utmost admiration. Right now several of our people's lives also depend on you. Please go to that evil monk and kill him with a fist or a palm."

Zhang Wuji pondered deeply and did not answer for half a day.

Shuo Bude added, "This evil monk took advantage of our precarious position and launched a sneak attack. It was a despicable deed, you have heard it with your own ears. If you don't kill him, tens of thousands Ming Cult people, from top to bottom, will be wiped out completely by outsiders. If you kill him, you are performing a huge virtuous deed and chivalrous duty."

Zhang Wuji still hesitated and did not say anything.

Yuan Zhen said, "Right this moment I cannot move the least bit. If you kill me, won't you be the laughingstock of all heroes under the heavens?"

"Stinky bald thief," Zhou Dian angrily said, "Shaolin Pai calls themselves a righteous major sect; but you surreptitiously came up here and launched a sneak attack. Won't you be the laughingstock of all heroes under the heavens?"

Zhang Wuji had taken a step toward Yuan Zhen, but then he stopped and said, "Shuo Bude Dashi [reverend], your precious Cult's dispute [orig. shi fei qu zhi - right or wrong, crooked or straight] with the Six Major Sects, Xiao Ke [the young one] does not know; Xiao Ke is very willing to help you, gentlemen, but is unwilling to harm this Great Monk from the Shaolin Pai."

"Xiao Xiongdi," Peng Yingyu said, "You are somewhat ignorant. If you do not kill him now, when this monk's

strength is restored, he will definitely kill you as well.”

Yuan Zhen said with a laugh, “I have neither grudges nor enmity with this Xiao Shizu [young benefactor]; how can I kill him without any reason? Let alone this Xiao Shizu does not belong to the Devil Cult; apparently, out of ill intention Bu Dai Heshang captured him and took him up the mountain. You, the Devil Cult people, have never shrunk from any crime; what good might come out of this for him?”

Both sides were huffing and puffing, it was extremely difficult for them to talk, but they forced themselves to speak, trying to touch Zhang Wuji’s heart. Zhang Wuji was in quandary; he had personally heard how this Yuan Zhen monk launched a sneak attack, which was a cowardly act. But to go forward and strike him dead was also against his wish. Besides, once he made his move, he would be standing in the Ming Cult’s side forever and become the enemy of the Six Major Sects. His Tai Shifu [grand master], the Six Heroes of Wudang, Zhou Zhiruo, and the others would become his enemy.

He also thought, “The Ming Cult is recognized by the mainstream Wulin community as demonic and heretical, such as Wei Yixiao sucks people’s blood and Yifu indiscriminately killed the innocent. Really they have done too many things they should have not done. Tai Shifu has repeatedly warned me not to make friends with the Devil Cult people to avoid the disaster of lifelong suffering. Because my Father had involvement with the Devil Cult by marrying my Mother, he had to commit suicide on the top of Wudang Mountain. A warning example is close at hand, road to disaster is straight ahead. Much less this Yuan Zhen is Divine Monk Kong Jian’s disciple. Kong Jian Dashi willingly endured thirteen punches of ‘Qi Shang Quan’ [seven-injury fist] with the hope of restoring my Yifu, but the end result was he died under the fist. This kind of benevolence, justice and mercy is extremely hard to come by within the Wulin world even from the

ancient times; how can I harm his disciple?”

As he heard Shuo Bude urge again, Zhang Wuji said, “Shuo Bude Dashi, could you teach me a way so that I do not need to harm this Great Monk while he also cannot harm all of you? Xiao Ke will certainly do as instructed.”

Shuo Bude thought, “Looking at the current situation, it is a fight to the death between the two parties; how can there be a way to preserve both sides? If Yuan Zhen does not die, then we will perish.”

While he was still deep in thought, Peng Yingyu said, “Xiao Xiongdi, your benevolence is truly admirable. In that case please stretch out your finger and lightly push the ‘yu tang’ [jade hall] acupoint on Yuan Zhen’s chest. This way you will definitely not harm him, you will only prevent him to use his internal energy for several hours. We will send someone to take him down the mountain, we will not harm even a hair on his body. Do you know the location of the ‘yu tang’ acupoint?”

Zhang Wuji’s medical knowledge was deep, he knew that if the ‘yu tang’ acupoint was lightly sealed, the flow of real ‘chi’ from the ‘dantian’ upward would be temporarily blocked, but his health would not be affected. Thereupon he said, “I do.”

He heard Yuan Zhen say, “Xiao Shizhu must not act on their behalf. You seal my acupoint, no doubt it is not fatal, but as soon as their internal energy is restored, they are going to kill me at once. How are you going to prevent it?”

“Your Mama’s stinking dog’s fart!” Zhou Dian cursed, “We said we are not going to harm you, naturally we are not going to harm you. Do you think the words of Wu San Ren of the Ming Cult cannot be trusted?”

Zhang Wuji believed that Yang Xiao and the Five Wanderers were people who would not fail to keep their own words, but he was not certain about Wei Yixiao. Thereupon he asked, "Wei Qianbei, what do you say?"

With a trembling voice Wei Yixiao said, "I won't harm him for now. But the next time we meet, we will disregard our lives and fight ... fight to the ... the death." By the time he said the words 'fight to the death', his voice was getting extremely weak while he was gasping for breath.

"Then so be it," Zhang Wuji said, "Guangming Shizhe [The Emissary of the Brightness], Qing Yi Fu Wang, and Wu San Ren, seven gentlemen, each one is a hero and warrior of the present age, how can they break their own promise renege their own words? Yuan Zhen Dashi, please forgive 'wanbei's offense." While saying that, he walked toward Yuan Zhen.

Because he was inside the sack, he could only take about one foot at a time; therefore, it was a dozen steps later that he finally arrived in front of Yuan Zhen. This kind of big cloth sack creeping forward slowly was actually a funny scene, but this moment everybody's life was hanging on a thread; nobody found it amusing.

Listening to Yuan Zhen's breathing, Zhang Wuji knew when he was about two feet away from him, so he stopped and said, "Yuan Zhen Dashi, 'wanbei' is doing this for the benefit of both sides, you must not blame me." While saying that, he slowly raised his hand.

With a bitter laugh Yuan Zhen said, "At this moment my whole body can't move; I can only let you, 'xiao wan bei', to do whatever you want."

Ever since the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu died, ZhangWuji's technique in acupoint identification was already incomparable in this present age. Yuan Zhen and he were separated by a cloth sack, but unexpectedly his stretched finger toward the 'yu tang' acupoint did not miss even a thousandths of a hair width. This 'yu tang' acupoint was located on the pit of the stomach, about one 'cun' six 'fen' [1 cun is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is about 1/3 of a centimeter] below the 'zi gong' [purple palace] acupoint, and about one 'cun' six 'fen' above the 'shan zhong' [mutton smell] acupoint. It belonged to the 'ren mai' [lit. free, unrestrained blood passage]. This blood passage was not a fatal major acupoint, but it was located as such that the 'chi' passage must pass through. If this passage was blocked, the flow of 'chi' in the entire body would be obstructed.

"Aiyo!" suddenly Yang Xiao, Leng Qian, Shuo Bude shouted together, "Quickly withdraw your hand!"

Zhang Wuji felt the forefinger of his right hand shook; a gust of cold 'chi' burst through his hand and spread throughout his body just like a lightning strike, immediately his body turned cold. He heard Zhou Dian, Priest Tieguan, and the others shouted curses at the same time, "Stinky bald thief, dare to use such treachery!"

Zhang Wuji's entire body shivered violently. He understood that although that Yuan Zhen could not move away, he was still able to send all his strength to his finger, which he positioned in front of his 'yu tang' acupoint. Because Zhang Wuji was inside the sack, he did not see that Yuan Zhen unexpectedly could still execute this countermeasure. As Zhang Wuji's finger arrived, two fingertips bumped into each other, the power of Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi' penetrated the cloth sack and went straight into his body.

In this situation of life and death, Yuan Zhen had used up his remaining strength on his finger. After the two fingers collided, his entire body was paralyzed and his countenance turned greenish pale that he looked like a corpse.

In the hall, there were originally eight men who were unable to move after receiving injuries. Now Zhang Wuji was added to their number. Zhou Dian was the one most irritated; although he was gasping for breath, he insisted on shouting curses at the Shaolin bald thief's shameless treachery. Yang Xiao and the others, however, thought that they could not blame Yuan Zhen. The enemy was threatening to seal his acupoint, he held out his hand in self-defense. He had done nothing improper.

Yuan Zhen's strength was completely depleted that he felt he was about to die. But secretly he was delighted, thinking this boy was still young, his power could not be too strong. After being hit by the 'huan yin zhi', he would certainly be dead in less than half a day, while in about two hours he would be able to slowly gather his dispersed real 'chi', and then he would be able to do anything he wanted.

The hall grew very quiet. After more than an hour later, the four candles illuminating the hall died out one after another. The hall became pitch black.

Yang Xiao and the others heard Yuan Zhen's intermittent breathing slowly evened up; it was heavy at first, but progressively getting longer. They knew the scattered real 'chi' in Yuan Zhen's body was slowly condensing, while whenever they tried to exert their own energy, a cold 'chi', like the ice-cold 'huan yin zhi', would burst into their 'dantian'. They could not help but shiver. Their despair grew, the anxiety was getting even more unbearable. They wished

for Yuan Zhen to recover quicker and quickly send out a palm strike to each of them so that they would die immediately, sparing them the seemingly endless torture of waiting anxiously.

Leng Qian, Zhou Dian and the others were content to just close their eyes waiting for death, simple and straightforward. Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu, however, could not set their minds at ease. Of the Five Wanderers, Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu were Buddhist monks [orig. 'chu jia ren' - those who leave their homes], but these two were also ones with the most ambition, the ones most care about the common people's suffering, the ones resolved to take the great undertaking. By this time the situation was already decided, they were certain they would lose their lives under the hands of Yuan Zhen. Everybody's lifelong magnificent aspiration would soon go down the drain.

"Peng Heshang," Shuo Bude mournfully said, "We have carefully laid a plan to drive the Mongolian Tatars away, who would have thought that in the end everything is wasted? Ay, to think that the calamity of millions of common people has reached its peak, yet they will still have to endure suffering for a longer time."

Zhang Wuji was generating hot 'chi' in his 'dantian' to fight the cold 'chi' of the 'huan yin zhi'. He clearly heard everything Shuo Bude said, and was unable to restrain from feeling strange. "He said they are planning on driving the Mongolian Tatars away?" he thought, "Could it be that the notoriously evil Devil Cult really have the good of common people in their minds?"

He heard Peng Yingyu reply, "Shuo Bude, I have already said that if we rely solely on our Ming Cult's strength, it is impossible for us to overtake the Mongolian Tatars. We have

to contact the world's heroes and warriors to join hands, only then we will succeed. In the past, your Shixiong [martial brother] Bang Hu and my Shidi [(younger) martial brother] Zhou Ziwang have raised arms in rebellion. The momentum was strong, but in the end they still utterly failed. Wasn't it because they did not involve the assistance of outsiders'?"

Zhou Dian loudly said, "Death is knocking on your door, yet you two, this pair of bald thieves, are still fighting a vague battle. One says he wants to rely mainly of the Ming Cult, the other says he wants to join hands with the major sects. To me, Zhou Dian, everything is nonsense! Merely a fart! Our Ming Cult is all split up in pieces, with our guts spilled all over the place; yet you still want to fart? Peng Heshang wants to get in touch with the orthodox major sects, it is an even louder fart, an extremely stinky fart. We are currently besieged by the Six Major Sects, and you want to communicate your fart with them?"

Priest Tieguan interrupted, "If Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, we would have beaten the Six Major Sects out of their wits, then we would not have to worry that they would not obey our command."

Zhou Dian laughed aloud and said, "The ox nose mixed-up hair [both are derogatory terms to call a Taoist priest] is releasing an even smellier ox fart! If Yang Jiaozhu were still alive, naturally everything would be alright; who wouldn't know it? You just talk too much ... aiyo ... aiyo!" As he opened his mouth to laugh, his 'chi' dispersed and the cold 'chi' of 'huan yin zhi' burst into his heart and lungs that he could not restrain from screaming in pain.

"Shut up!" Leng Qian said. As soon as he said those two words, everybody calmed down immediately.

Zhang Wuji's heart was still filled with disquieting thoughts: "Apparently there are many twists and turns surrounding this Ming Cult; they are obviously more than just a bunch of evildoers." Thereupon he said, "Shuo Bude Dashi, what exactly is your precious Cult's objective? Could you possibly reveal it to me?"

"Ha, you are not dead yet?" Shuo Bude said, "Xiao Xiongdi, with no reason whatsoever you deliver your life because of the Ming Cult, we feel very sorry. In any case you won't live past a few more hours, so I don't see any reason why I cannot tell you the secret of our Cult. Leng Mian Xianzheng, what do you say?"

"Tell!" Leng Qian said. Instead of saying, 'it's alright, you can tell him', six words, it was enough for him to say just one word, 'tell'.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Shuo Bude said, "Our Ming Cult originated from Persia. It entered the Central Earth during the Tang dynasty. At that time it was called 'Xian Jiao' [Zoroastrianism]. By imperial decree, Tang emperors allowed Guangming [brightness] Temples to be built everywhere as our Ming Cult's monasteries. Our Cult's creed is to do good and shun evil, that all living creatures are equal. Those who have silver and gold ought to share it with the poor. No meat no wine. We worship the Ming Zun [Brightness prophet]. The Ming Zun is actually the God of Fire, the virtuous deity. It was because corrupt government officials bullied our Cult, our Cult brethren were angered and often staged rebellions. From the Northern Song's Fang La, Fang Jiaozhu, I don't know how many times we have raised our arms."

Zhang Wuji had also heard about Fang La's reputation; he knew Fang La was named one of the Four Great Bandits of the Northern Song, sharing the same honor with Song Jian

[from the Water Margin], Wang Qing, and Tian Hu. Thereupon he asked, "So Fang La was your precious Cult's Jiaozhu?"

"That's right," Shuo Bude said, "In the years of 'Jian Yan' of the Southern Song, there was Wang Zongshi Jiaozhu at Xinzhou [Jiangxi], in the years of 'Shao Xing', Yu Wupo Jiaozhu raised arms at Quzhou [Zhejiang], during the 'Shao Ding' years of Emperor Li Zong, Zhang Sanqiang Jiaozhu staged a rebellion at Jiangxi and Guangdong regions. It was because our Cult often opposed the imperial authorities that the imperial government started to call us 'the Devil Cult' and strictly forbade our activities. To survive, inevitably our operations became surreptitious so we can evade the authorities' eyes and ears. In the meantime, the accumulated grievances between us and the orthodox major sects grew to the level similar to water and fire. Admittedly, within our own Cult there were unavoidably certain individuals who were not self-introspective, some evildoer disciples, who relying on their superb martial art skill to indiscriminately killed, raped and plundered the innocents. As a result, today our Cult's prestige within the Jianghu is declining ..."

Suddenly Yang Xiao interrupted in cold voice, "Shuo Bude, are you talking about me?"

Shuo Bude said, "My name is 'Shuo Bude' [can't say]; I won't say anything that is not supposed to be spoken. Whoever has done the deed, he understands. This is called 'the teeth chew the wontons, the stomach knows how many'."

"Humph," Yang Xiao snorted, but did not say anything.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji was startled by a realization: "Hey, how come I am not cold anymore?" When he was hit by Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi', the cold was unbearable, but after a while, surprisingly the cold 'chi' completely vanished.

What actually happened was: he was hit by the 'yin' poison of the 'xuan ming shen zhang' [black/mysterious and deep divine palm], which lasted until he was seventeen when the poison was completely eradicated from his system. During the seven years, day in and day out his body was fighting the cold poison; thereupon his body developed a natural defense against the cold, just like blinking his eyes or breathing, which he instinctively does. Much less after he trained the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, although he had not reached perfection yet, the last hurdle had not been passed, the 'yang' 'chi' inside his body was quite abundant, so that without taking too much time, the 'yin' poison was completely driven out.

In the meantime, Shuo Bude continued, "Ever since our Great Song perished under the hands of Mongolian Tatars, the Ming Cult becomes the mortal enemy of the imperial government more and more, because our Cult has taken the duty to drive out the invaders. Only it's a pity that for the past few years the Ming Cult has become like a dragon without a head. Because the masters within the Cult are fighting over the Jiaozhu position, we have been constantly killing each other. In the end, some washed their hands and lived in seclusion; some founded another sect and became the Jiaozhu. After our Cult fell apart, the enmity with the prestigious schools and orthodox sects grew deeper, until finally we reached the situation we are in today. Yuan Zhen Heshang, did you hear even half a sentence of lie in what I just said?"

"Humph," Yuan Zhen said, "No lies, no lies! You all are in front of the death's door, why would you tell any lie?" While he said that, he slowly stood up and took a step forward.

"Ah!" Yang Xiao and the Five Wanderers cried out in alarm.

Although they all knew he was going to recover first, they did not expect his internal strength to be this profound that even after being hit by Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao's 'cold ice soft palm', his recovery would be this quick. They watched his imposing stature; as his left foot took another step forward, his body was as steady as a rock.

Yang Xiao laughed coldly. "Kong Jian Shen Seng's distinguished disciple really is not to be trifled with, but you have not answered my question earlier. Could it be that there is some dubious affair in this matter that you cannot tell the truth?"

"Ha ... ha ..." Yuan Zhen laughed while taking another step forward. "You are not going to die with your eyes closed before knowing all the details, aren't you?" he said, "You asked me how I knew the secret passages in the Brightness Peak, how I could pass through the layer upon layer of natural stronghold, and stealthily [as before, the original was 'deity does not know, demon does not aware'] going up the mountain peak. Very well, I am going to tell you, gentlemen, the truth. It was your own precious Cult's Yang Dingtian Jiaozhu, husband and wife, who personally lead me up here."

Yang Xiao shivered involuntarily; he thought, "Based on his status, there is no way he would tell a lie; but how can there be such thing?"

Meanwhile, Zhou Dian had already cursed, "You are just releasing your eighteen generation ancestors' fart! This secret passage is the Brightness Peak's greatest secret, it is our Cult's sacred passageway. Although Yang Zuoshi [left emissary] is a Guangming Shizhe [emissary of the Brightnes], Wei Dage [big brother] is a Hu Jiao Fa Wang, they have never walked on that passage. Only the Cult Leader, one man, can use this secret passage. How could Yang

Jiaozhu take you, an outsider, into this secret passage?"

Yuan Zhen sighed and was lost in thought for half a day before quietly said, "Since you insist on getting to the bottom of this matter, I am going to tell you a secret that happened twenty-five years ago. You all are not going to go down the mountain alive anyway, so I am not worried that you would divulge this matter. Ay! Zhou Dian, you are right, this secret passage is the Ming Cult's sacred passageway, it was always only the Jiaozhu, one man, who can enter it. Anybody else entering it would be considered a sacrilege, punishable by the most severe punishment, without any possibility of pardon. However, Madame Yang Dingtian had entered it. Yang Dingtian had violated the religious law by personally sneaking his wife into this secret passage..."

(Zhou Dian cut him off by cussing, "Fart! A stinky dog's fart!" Peng Yingyu rebuked him harshly, "Zhou Dian, shut up!")

"In turn, Madame Yang also personally took me in ..."

(Zhou Dian cursed again, "Damn it! Pei! Pei!" he spat, "Nonsense!")

"... I am not a Ming Cult disciple; technically, I did not violate you Cult's law. Ay, even if I were a Ming Cult disciple, even if I committed a grave offense against the Cult, what should I be afraid of?" As he recounted these past events, surprisingly his voice sounded so forlorn.

"Why did Madame Yang take you into the secret passage?" Priest Tieguan asked.

"It was something that happened a long, long time ago," Yuan Zhen replied, "Today Lao Na [lit. old cassock, a term used by Buddhist monk to call himself] is an old man, over

seventy years of age ... but when I was young ... Alright, I will tell you everything. Do you gentlemen know who I am? Madame Yang was my Shimei [martial (younger) sister], before Lao Na left home, my secular surname was Cheng, my given name was Kun, I was none other than the 'Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou' ['hun yuan' - origin of the universe, 'pi li' - thunderbolt, 'shou' - hand]!"

As soon as these words came out of his mouth, no doubt Yang Xiao and the others were shocked beyond belief; Zhang Wuji, who was inside the cloth sack, was even more shocked that he cried out in alarm. The stories he heard from his Yifu that night on the Bing Huo Island immediately came back vividly to his mind; how his Yifu's master, Cheng Kun, had killed his entire family: parents, wife and son; how Yifu has excessively massacred Wulin people to force Cheng Kun to appear; and how he had wounded Divine Monk Kong Jian with his fist, but Cheng Kun had not fulfilled his promise to appear in the flesh ...

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, "Turned out at that time this evil Cheng Kun had bowed to Kong Jian Shen Seng as his master. Because Kong Jian Shen Seng wanted to resolve this debt of sin, he willingly took Yifu's thirteen 'Qi Shang Quan' [seven-injury fist] punches. Who would have thought that Cheng Kun also deceived his Shifu and had caused Kong Jian Shen Seng to die with unsatisfied regret?"

He thought further, "As a result, Yifu's insanity flared up and he killed the innocents indiscriminately that all Clans and Sects went up Mount Wudang together, forcing my Father and Mother to their deaths. All things considered, the main reason of all these affairs is Cheng Kun's mischief."

All of a sudden an incomparable anger flared in his breast; he felt his whole body was parched as if he was burning. This

'air pocket of the universe' of Shuo Bude was airtight. He had been stuffed inside the sack for a long time, the oxygen inside was depleted long ago. Because of his profound internal energy, Zhang Wuji was able to survive this long by breathing like a tortoise, i.e. he needed very little air. Now that his mind was suddenly agitated, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi [real 'chi' of Jiu Yang] in his 'dantian' was out of control and was about to burst out. Immediately he felt like he was inside a burning stove and was unable to restrain from groaning loudly.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhou Dian said sternly, "Everybody's life is in danger; everybody's distress is difficult to bear, but a real man will not show weakness by groaning loudly."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji responded, immediately he circulated his internal energy according to the Nine Yang Manual to blend his 'chi' evenly throughout his body. Usually, whenever he did this, his mind would calm down like still water, his spirit would transcend beyond the material world; however, as he circulated his energy this time, his four limbs and hundreds of bones felt unbearably painful, as if there were hundreds of small needles, all were burning red, simultaneously pricking his major acupoints all over his body.

During the several years he was training the Nine Yang Manual, although he had uncovered the mystery of the world's most excellent martial art study, he did not have any expert master to give him directions, he was merely groping in the dark. As a result, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was accumulating in his body, but had not been put to use to break through the last major hurdle. He was fine as long as nothing triggering the 'zhen qi'. But Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi' was the Wulin world's most poisonous 'yin' martial art. As soon as it entered Zhang Wuji's body, it was like the gunpowder being ignited. But because he was inside the

'qian kun yi qi' sack, the excited Jiu Yang Zhen Qi had nowhere to go, therefore, it came back and attacked his own body.

In this short period of time, he had experienced the most difficult and dangerous moment a warrior must go through in cultivating the internal energy. It was the moment where life or death, success or failure, were hanging on a thread. Of course Zhou Dian and the others did not know that at that particular time, Zhang Wuji was right at the critical juncture where the water met the fire, the dragon clashed with the tiger; they thought he was simply groaning in pain with his dying breath after being hit by Yuan Zhen's 'fantastical yin finger'.

While Zhang Wuji was struggling hard to resist the torment of the heating 'yang chi', every sentence Yuan Zhen spoke was transmitted clearly into his ears: "Shimei's family and mine have been friends for many generations. The two of us were engaged ever since we were very young. Who would have thought that Yang Dingtian was also secretly in love with my Shimei. When he took up the duty as the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu, his power rose until it shook the heavens. My Shimei's parents were admittedly greedy people who craved selfish gain, while Shimei herself did not have a strong character. Unexpectedly she married him, but their marriage was not necessarily a happy one. Sometimes she wanted to see me. Unavoidably, we must find an extremely secret place for our rendezvous.

Yang Dingtian always complied with everything Shimei wished for, he did not dare to disobey the least bit. When she wanted to look at the secret passage, although Yang Dingtian very much did not want to allow her, in the end he could not resist her persuasion and ended up taking her into the secret passage. From that time on, the secret passage of the

Brightness Peak, the most sacred ground of the Ming Cult for several hundred years, has become your Madame Jiaozhu's and my secret rendezvous place. Ha ... ha ... ha ... ha ... I have been coming and going through this secret passage more than a dozen times; is it any wonder that today I can easily go up the mountain?"

Listening to this narrative, Zhou Dian, Yang Xiao and the others were at a loss of words. Zhou Dian only started to curse, "Fa ..." but did not continue. Their breasts were filled with anger that they felt they were going to explode. They had never heard the Ming Cult being insulted as grave as this time. Moreover, today's destruction of the Ming Cult was all because this secret passage was breached. Although they were listening with anger as if their eyes were spouting fire, they all realized that Yuan Zhen did not tell a lie.

"What? Are you angry?" Yuan Zhen said, "Yang Dingtian was blatantly destroying my marriage. She was clearly my beloved wife; just because Yang Dingtian rose up to become the boss of the Devil Cult, he snatched my wife away just like that. My hatred toward the Devil Cult is such that I refuse to coexist with you under the same sky.

On the day Yang Dingtian married my Shimei, I came to offer my congratulations, but when I was drinking their wine of happiness, I swore a heavy oath in my heart: 'As long as there is one breath remaining in Cheng Kun's body, I will definitely kill Yang Dingtian and destroy the Devil Cult completely.' It has been more than forty years since I swore that oath, and today I see the great success of my effort. Ha ... ha ... I, Cheng Kun, have fulfilled my wish, now I can die with closed eyes."

Yang Xiao coldly said, "Thank you very much for clarifying a great suspicion in my heart. Yang Jiaozhu died suddenly but the cause of his death was unknown. Turns out he died under

your hands."

With a conviction in his voice Yuan Zhen said, "At that time Yang Dingtian's martial art skill was a lot higher than mine. Not to mention at that time, I am afraid even now my martial art skill still cannot surpass his skill of that time ..."

"And so you injured Yang Jiaozhu sneakily," Zhou Dian cut him off, "If not by poison, then it must be a sneak attack like this time."

Yuan Zhen sighed and shook his head. "No," he said, "My Shimei was afraid I would do just that. She warned me continually that if I killed Yang Dingtian, she would break all ties with me immediately. She said that by having a tryst with me she had already committed a serious offense against her husband, if on top of that I maliciously harm him, the Heaven would never forgive her. Yang Dingtian, ay, Yang Dingtian, he ... he died on his own account."

"Ah!" Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others exclaimed simultaneously.

"If Yang Dingtian indeed died under my palms, I would have spared your Ming Cult ..." Yuan Zhen added. His voice trailed off as he recalled the events that happened several decades ago. In a slow and deep voice he continued, "That particular night, my Shimei and I were having our rendezvous in the secret passage. Suddenly we heard a very heavy breathing from the left, something that had never happened before. This passage was extremely secret, no outsider would be able to find its entrance; if it were a Ming Cult disciple, they would never dare to enter. When the two of us heard this sound of breathing, we were extremely shocked and quickly looked around to see what it was, only to see that Yang Dingtian was sitting inside a small room. There was a sheet of sheepskin in

his hands, his face was dark red like blood. When he saw us, he said, 'The two of you, very good, you have done to me very good indeed!' While saying this, his face suddenly turned pale, but this ashen face immediately vanished, turned into blood red. This turning from ashen to red happened quickly three times in the blink of an eye. Yang Zuo Shi, do you know this martial art skill?"

Yang Xiao replied, "That was our Cult's divine skill, the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi."

"Yang Xiao," Zhou Dian said, "You have also mastered it, haven't you?"

"How can I dare to say 'I have mastered it'?" Yang Xiao said, "In the past, just because Yang Jiaozhu regarded me with respect, he had passed on some shallow introductions of this divine skill. I trained it for more than ten years, but so far I only reach no higher than the second level. When I tried to continue, it was like the real 'chi' in my entire body was trying to burst out of my brain, no matter what I did, I simply could not control it. Yang Jiaozhu was able to change his countenance three times in a flash; that means he had reached the fourth level. He once said that among the Cult Leaders of previous generation, the eighth generation Jiaozhu possessed the highest martial art skill. It was said that he managed to master the fifth level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. But on the same day that he mastered it, he died of a fire deviation. From that time on, no one has ever mastered the fourth level."

"That difficult?" Zhou Dian asked.

Priest Tieguan said, "If it is not that difficult, how can it be called the Ming Cult's protective divine skill?"

They were all masters within the Ming Cult; naturally they had heard about the divine skill Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi for a long time and had always been fascinated with it. Consequently, although they were presently in a precarious situation, they could not restrain from having a discussion about it.

“Yang Zuo Shi,” Peng Yingyu said, “When Yang Jiaozhu reached this fourth level, why did his countenance change?” Actually, he inquired this slightly out-of-topic subject for another profound reason; he knew that if Yuan Zhen took several more steps forward, he would strike everybody dead with his palms. Thereupon he strived to bring up past events to gain as much time as possible. As long as one among their Cult’s seven masters could recover in time and fight back, he could hold Yuan Zhen back momentarily. Even if he was not Yuan Zhen’s match, perhaps the situation would change to their advantage. Anyway, it would beat just sitting there waiting for their deaths.

How could Yang Xiao not understand his intention? Thereupon he said, “The main principle of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi divine skill is to shift the rigid and flexible, yin and yang, two ‘chi’ of the universe. When the countenance appears bluish pale and red during training, it is because the blood subsides, the real ‘chi’ changes shapes. It was said that when one reaches the sixth level, the entire body would turn abruptly from bluish pale to red and vice versa; but by the seventh level, the yin and yang blend harmoniously that there would not be any visible sign externally.”

Peng Yingyu was afraid Yuan Zhen would grow impatient, thereupon he asked him, “Yuan Zhen Dashi, in the end, how did our Yang Jiaozhu return to the Heaven?”

With a cold laugh Yuan Zhen said, “After all of you were hit

by my 'huan yin zhi', I can hear from the sound of your breathing and the way you circulate your 'chi' that, you will definitely not be able to restore your energy within four hours. You want to gain time, hoping that you would get out of trouble by your own 'chi'. Let me tell you, gentlemen, frankly: you won't have enough time. All of you are martial art masters; even if you receive a more serious injury, after circulating your internal energy this long, you should have felt improvement no matter how slight. But how come your body is growing stiffer and stiffer?"

Actually, Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others had realized this fact early on, but they were not willing to lose heart as long as they still have one breath remaining.

They heard Yuan Zhen say, "When I saw Yang Dingtian's countenance changed irregularly, I could not help but panic. My Shimei knew his martial art skill was extremely high. Just one strike and he would have sent us to our death. She said, 'Dingtian, it is all my fault. Please let Cheng Shige [martial (older) brother] go down the mountain, whatever punishment you care to give, I am resigned to accept.' Hearing her words, Yang Dingtian shook his head and slowly said, 'I married your body, but I cannot marry your heart.' He stared hard at us; but suddenly two lines of blood flowed down from his eyes, his body stiffened and he no longer moved. Shimei was greatly shocked. 'Dingtian, Dingtian!' she called out, 'What happened?'"

Although his voice was not loud, Yuan Zhen uttered these words in the quietness of the night, plus everybody was still thinking about the terrifying situation of blood flowing down from Yang Dingtian's eyes, all of them were quite shaken.

Yuan Zhen continued, "She called out several times, but Yang Dingtian was still motionless. My Shimei gathered her

courage and stepped forward to pull his hand, but he was already stiff. When she felt his breathing, it turned out he had already died. I know in her heart she was exceedingly grieved, so I tried to console her, 'It seems that he was in the middle of training some kind of extremely difficult martial art and accidentally suffered fire deviation so that his real 'chi' was heavily reversed to such an extent as he was beyond help.'

My Shimei said, 'That's right, he was training the Ming Cult's timeless distinguished skill, the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. While in a critical juncture, he suddenly discovered you and I were having a private meeting in here. Although I did not personally kill him, he died because of me.' I was about to say something to comfort her and ease her burden when she suddenly pointed her finger somewhere behind me. 'Who's there?' she shouted. I hastily turned around but did not see even half a shadow of anybody else. When I turned back, I saw a dagger had already pierced the pit of her stomach; she had killed herself.

Hey, hey, Yang Dingtian said, 'I married your body, but I cannot marry your heart.' I had won Shimei's heart, but in the end I could not own her body. She was the only woman I ever loved and respected my whole life. If not for Yang Dingtian stirred up trouble, how could our blissful marriage end up in such a tragic way? If Yang Dingtian did not rise to become the Devil Cult's Cult Leader, my Shimei would have never agreed to marry someone who was more than twenty years her senior.

Yang Dingtian had died; there is nothing I can do to him. But the Devil Cult is still alive and running amuck in the world. At that time, pointing my finger toward the corpses of Yang Dingtian and my Shimei, two people, I said, 'I, Cheng Kun, swear to do everything I can to destroy the Ming Cult. The

day I successfully accomplish my oath, I will come here to your presence and cut my own throat to express my apologies.' Ha ha ... Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, you are going to die soon, I, Cheng Kun, also will not live much longer. It's just that my heart's desire is achieved; I will happily kill myself, so I am ten-thousand times better than you are. Over these years, for me, not a day passed by without contemplating a way to destroy the Devil Cult. Ay, I, Cheng Kun, have been unfortunate my whole life; my beloved wife was taken from me, and my only beloved disciple hated me to the bones ..."

Hearing Cheng Kun brought up Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji paid a closer attention. Only when he tried to concentrate, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his body grew more abundantly, so that he felt as if his four limbs and hundreds of bones were swollen to the point that his body was about to burst; as if each strand of his hair was inflated several folds.

He heard Yun Zhen continue, "After going down the Brightness Peak, I returned to the Central Plains to seek my beloved disciple Xie Xun, whom I have not seen for many years. To my dismay, after talking to him, I have found out that he has become one of the Devil Cult's four great Hu Jiao Fa Wang. Although I visited the Brightness Peak often, my heart had always been on my Shimei, one person; I did not care about any of your shady businesses, my Shimei also had never said anything about the Cult's affairs. My disciple Xie Xun's position within the Devil Cult was quite high; but it was not before he mentioned it himself that I knew about it. With all his might he persuaded me to join the Devil Cult; he said something about joining forces with one heart, driving the barbarians away, my anger was not small. But I also realized that the Devil Cult has had long history and was deeply rooted; the number of masters within the Cult was also as abundant as the clouds. If I rely on my own strength, there was no chance I could destroy it completely. Let's not talk

about me, one person; even if the Wulin heroes and warriors under the heavens joined hands, we might not necessarily be able to destroy it completely. My only hope was to incite disharmony from within, let them massacre one another, let the Devil Cult destroy the Devil Cult."

Listening to this point, Yang Xiao and the others were unable to restrain their shock. Over the last several dozen of years, each one of them were completely in the dark, totally unaware that a major enemy was watching and waiting outside, with a deliberate plan to destroy the Ming Cult. Because of the dispute over the Cult Leader position, they failed to see the more sinister chaos waiting to happen. Yuan Zhen's words were like a stick striking their heads, waking them up to a violent realization.

In the meantime, Yuan Zhen continued, "Immediately I maintained my composure, I only said that this matter was such of a great substance that I must not be rash without giving it further consideration. Several days later, while pretending to be drunk, I tried to rape my disciple Xie Xun's wife. Seizing the opportunity, I killed his entire family: his parents, his wife and his son. I know that because of this, he would hate me to the bones and would definitely try to find me to seek revenge. If he could not find me, he was bound to commit outrageous acts recklessly. Ha ha ... nobody knows a disciple better than his master. This boy Xie Xun is good in every aspect; his literary and martial art skills were extraordinary. It's just that he was easily provoked to anger; he could not carefully reflect on cause and effects of everything ..."

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji could not suppress the anger in his heart much longer. He thought, "Turns out all these misfortunes befell on Yifu were the result of this old thief, Cheng Kun's secret plot. This old thief was not drunk; it

was part of his deliberate scheming."

Yuan Zhen was immensely proud of himself. "Xie Xun killed Jianghu warriors indiscriminately," he said, "In all places he left behind my name; he wanted to force me to come out. Ha ha ... how could I step forward bravely? If you don't want anyone to know, don't do it. Xie Xun gained innumerable enemies. Eventually these blood debts were put on the Ming Cult's account. Once in a while he got into dangerous situations while doing his killings and I secretly helped him. He was the blade with which I kill others; how could I let him be destroyed by others? You, the Devil Cult, faced enemies on the outside as numerous as the leaves on a tree, your own masters were fighting over the Jiaozhu position in the inside; your internal strife was endless, and thus step by step you fell into my plot.

Xie Xun failed to kill Song Yuanqiao. It was a regrettable matter, but he punched Shaolin's Divine Monk Kong Jian to his death, injured Kongtong Wu Lao [five elders] with his palm, and killed countless masters of various schools and sects on the Wang Pan Island. He even harmed the Heavenly Eagle Cult's 'tan zhu' [altar leader] of his old friend's Yin Tianzheng ... Good disciple, a very nice disciple indeed. I spared no effort in passing to him all excellent martial art skills. It truly was not in vain!"

"If that's the case," Yang Xiao coldly said, "Your Shifu Kong Jian Shen Seng also died under your treacherous plan."

Yuan Zhen laughed. "Do you think I was sincere when I bowed to Kong Jian? He received several kowtows from me for the price of his old life. I can't say he suffered any losses ... Ha ha ... ha ha ...!"

While Yuan Zhen roared in laughter, Zhang Wuji's anger

flared uncontrollably. His ears were buzzing and he passed out, but a short while later he regained consciousness. In all his life he had received countless bullying and humiliation, so he was able to take it indifferently. But he was thinking about his Yifu, who was a strong and bold warrior, who had unexpectedly fallen under Cheng Kun's treacherous plan to such an extent where his family perished and his own reputation destroyed, in the end his eyes were blinded and he lived all alone on a desolate island waiting for his death. It was such a deep enmity and great hatred; how could he not avenge him?

As his anger filled his breast, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his entire body was aroused, the real 'chi' flowed out but could not leak outside the sack; the 'Universe Air Sack' started to inflate. However, Yang Xiao and the others were captivated by Yuan Zhen's story; nobody paid any attention to the inflating cloth sack.

"Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Peng Heshang, Zhou Dian," he heard Yuan Zhen said, "Don't you have anything else to say?"

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "Since it has come to this, what else can we say? Yuan Zhen Dashi, can you spare my daughter's life? Her mother was Ji Xiaofu of Emei Pai; she came from an upright family, she has not joined our Devil Cult."

"Rearing a tiger reaping a danger, pulling grass must be from its root!" Yuan said, while taking another step forward. His palm stretched out, slowly came down toward the crown of Yang Xiao's head.

Inside the cloth sack, Zhang Wuji heard the critical situation outside. He felt his entire body was burning. By listening to the sound to determine the position, he leaped in front of

Yuan Zhen; raising his left hand inside the sack, he blocked Yuan Zhen's palm with the back of his palm. In this one strike, Yuan Zhen was actually exerting himself, because his 'chi' had not completely recovered. As his strike was blocked by Zhang Wuji, he staggered and was pushed a step backward.

"Good kid! You ... you ..." he stammered. Steadying himself, he swept his palm forward, striking the cloth sack. The palm did not hit Zhang Wuji's body, but landed on the inflating sack and bounced back that he was pushed two steps back. Yuan Zhen was shocked, not knowing what had happened.

By this time Zhang Wuji's mouth was parched, his head was dizzy, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside his body expanded to the point that he felt he was about to explode. If the 'universe air sack' exploded first, then he would escape danger; otherwise, when the real 'chi' inside his body reached its critical point, his flesh and skin would split open and he would be burned like a black coal.

Seeing the weird cloth sack, Yuan Zhen immediately took two steps forward and launched another palm strike. As before, his palm bounced and he was pushed one step backward, but the cloth sack was also pushed back by his palm strength. Like a giant ball it rolled several times along the ground.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was also tumbling down repeatedly. With the 'chi' filling his chest, he felt his torso was about to burst. He wanted to release the real 'chi' out of his body, but by this time the sack was simply too full; just to let out a breath was getting more and more difficult.

Yuan Zhen successively punched three times and kicked twice, but all his attacks bounced on the cloth sack full of real 'chi'. Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji had already fainted.

Fortunately all of Yuan Zhen's attacks landed on the sack; if his hands and feet had made direct contact with Zhang Wuji's body, with the overflowing real 'chi' in his body, Yuan Zhen would definitely suffer serious injury.

Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others watched this strange occurrence in amazement, but they were also surprised that they were at a loss of what to do. This 'universe air sack' belonged to Shuo Bude, but even he did not understand why the sack was inflated like a ball. They did not even know whether Zhang Wuji was still alive inside the sack.

They saw Yuan Zhen pull a dagger from his waist and ferociously stab it onto the sack. But where the point of the dagger met the sack, the dagger simply sank into the sack and bounced back out without creating any damage. The sack was made of some strange material; it was neither silk nor leather, but of some kind of unusual and extremely rare material under the heavens. Also Yuan Zhen's dagger was not a treasured blade; although he stabbed several times, how could the blade overcome the sack?

Seeing his palms, feet and dagger were all ineffective, Yuan Zhen thought, "Why would I waste my time with this kid?" His leg flew up and he kicked with all his might. The large sack rolled straight toward the door of the hall.

By this time the cloth sack was fully inflated into a big ball. As soon as it hit the door, it bounced back with great speed toward Yuan Zhen. Realizing the sack was coming at him with a violent force, Yuan Zhen raised up his palms in front of his chest and pushed forward at the big ball with all his strength.

'Ka-boom!' The noise was like a thunder in a cloudless day, followed by shreds of cloth fluttered in the air as the 'qiankun yi qi dai', fully inflated with Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Zhen Qi,

exploded into pieces.

Yuan Zhen, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude and the others felt an exceedingly burning hot air burst onto their bodies; next they saw a young man in tattered clothes standing in the middle of the hall, with a bewildered look on his face.

In that short time, Zhang Wuji had achieved the full potential of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong; water and fire flowed together, the dragon and the tiger converged. Because the sack was filled with abundant real 'chi', it was as if dozens of masters put forth their strengths and simultaneously massaged the several hundred acupoints on his body. The real 'chi' inside and outside of his body surged together to break the dozens of obstacles all over his blood passages. He felt an incomparable comfort as if a stream of mercury flowed along all his entire network of blood vessels. No one had ever met this kind of destiny, and now that the treasured sack was destroyed, no one would ever encounter such opportunity again.

Yuan Zhen saw that the young man from the sack was standing with a blank expression on his face as if he had lost his mind. Although he was severely wounded, if he did not seize this fleeting moment immediately, and if the enemy preceded him in taking the initiative, his life would be in danger indeed. Thereupon he rushed one step forward with an extended right-hand index finger, sending his 'huan yin zhi' internal strength straight toward the 'shan zhong' acupoint on Zhang Wuji's chest.

ZhangWuji swept his palm to parry. He had just completed his 'shen gong' [divine strength/power] cultivation, however, his martial art skill was still mediocre; he had not mastered the martial art skills previously taught by Xie Xun and his own father, how could he fight such an accomplished martial

art master like Yuan Zhen? In just one move, the 'yang chi' ['yang' reservoir] acupoint on his wrist was sealed by Yuan Zhen. Immediately a numbing cold burst into his body; he shivered and was pushed a step backward. But his body was still overflowing with real 'chi', which in a flash was also transferred to Yuan Zhen's body via his finger.

Two different types of energy collided; one yin the other yang, exact opposite to each other, but Zhang Wuji's internal energy came from Jiu Yang Shen Gong, the strength of his power far outweighed Yuan Zhen's. Yuan Zhen's finger heated up; he felt as if his internal energy dispersed all over his body. Moreover, he had already suffered a heavy injury, the level of his power was only one-tenth his normal strength. Realizing the situation was disadvantageous for him, he thought saving his own life was more important; thereupon he turned around and ran away.

"Cheng Kun, you big evil thief!" Zhang Wuji angrily cursed, "Leave your life behind!" Moving his feet, he ran after him out of the door. He saw a flash of Yuan Zhen's shadow as he entered another door. With anger filling his breast, Zhang Wuji rushed forward to pursue. But as soon as he exerted his strength, 'Bang!' his forehead heavily hit the doorframe.

What happened was: he did not know that after he had reached the full potential of his 'shen gong', a lifting of his hand, a kick of his foot, would be ten times more powerful than his usual strength. With just one big stride, he lost control and bumped his head on the doorframe.

Rubbing his slightly sore forehead, he mused, "Confound this demonic door; how come just one step took me this far?"

Busily he leaned sideways to enter the door, and saw that it was a small room. In his zeal to avenge his Yifu, he ran across

the room toward the door on the other end. Outside the room was a courtyard, the air was filled with the fragrance of flowers and plants in the middle of the courtyard. He saw light coming out from a window of the room on the western side of the courtyard. He leaped toward the room and pushed the door open. He saw a flash of grey shadow; Yuan Zhen was pulling a curtain open and ran in. Zhang Wuji followed after him; but as he pulled open the curtain, Yuan Zhen was nowhere to be seen.

Zhang Wuji focused his eyes to look around and could not help but was inwardly surprised. This room looked like a chamber belonging to a young lady of a greatly rich family. There was a dressing table standing next to the window, with a large red candle burning brightly on top of it, casting its light on a beautifully embroidered tapestry in the middle of the room, it looked imposingly rich and beautiful, not at all inferior to Zhu Jiuzhen's room.

On the other side was the bed, with a gauze mosquito net drooping over it. There was a pair of pink embroidered shoes in front of the bed; obviously there was a woman sleeping on the bed. The only door to this room that he could see was the one he entered in; the windows were tightly closed. He had clearly seen Yuan Zhen enter the room, how could he disappear without any trace in just a blink of an eye? Could it be that he mastered some kind of art of invisibility? Or perhaps despite his status as a 'chu jia ren' [lit. those who leave home] he was hiding inside a woman's bed?

Zhang Wuji was contemplating whether he should open the bed's curtain to search for the enemy when suddenly he heard intermittent sound of footsteps; somebody was coming. Quickly he dodged behind a piece of blanket draped by the western wall, right before two people walked in.

From behind the blanket, Zhang Wuji peeked out and saw two girls; one was wearing light yellow silk robe, her dress and adornment were luxurious. The other was a younger girl, wearing dark green cotton robe; looked like she was the young maid.

"Xiaojie [miss]," the young maid said in a raspy voice, "The night is deep, please have some rest."

The 'miss' turned around and slapped the young maid's face heavily with the back of her hand. The young maid staggered and fallback one step. The body of the 'miss' swayed and she turned around completely. Under the candlelight Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly her big round eyes, with deep black pupils, on a round-shaped face. She was none other than Yang Buhui, whom he escorted for tens of thousands 'li' all the way from the Central Plains to the remote Western Region.

It had been several years; she had grown a lot taller, but her mannerism did not change, particularly the downward curve at the corners of her mouth, which he recognized as her childhood feature, was more pronounced.

He heard she cursed the maid, "You told me to sleep, humph, the Six Major Sects are besieging the Brightness Peak, my Father and his colleagues have been discussing plans to fight the enemy all night and have not finished yet. He [orig. 'lao ren jia' - a polite term for an older person] has not slept, how can I sleep? It would be best if my Father is killed by the enemy, and then you can kill me; you would gain everything your heart desires." The young maid did not dare to defend herself, she simply helped her to sit down.

"Quickly get my sword!" Yang Buhui said.

The young maid walked toward the wall and took off the sword hanging on the wall. Her ankles were shackled with an iron chain, her wrists were also shackled with iron chain. Her left leg was limping, her back was arched like a humpback. When she had the sword in her hands and turned around, Zhang Wuji was even more startled; he saw her right eye was small, the left eye was big, her nose and the corners of her mouth were twisted. In short, her form was extremely unsightly. He thought, "This young lady's appearance is uglier than Zhu'er. But Zhu'er is ugly because the poison in her body had caused the bumps on her face; she can be cured completely. This young miss, however, has an inborn deformity."

Yang Buhui received the sword and said, "The enemy could be here any time, I want to patrol outside."

"I am coming with Miss," the young maid said, "If we meet the enemy, we can look after each other." Her voice was so raspy that it was hard to understand; she sounded more like an uncouth middle-aged man than a young girl.

"Who wants your fake good intention?" Yang Buhui said. Her left hand reached back and grabbed the pulse on the wrist of that young maid's right hand; the young maid was immediately paralyzed.

"Xiaojie," she said in a trembling voice, "You ... you ..."

"A large number of the enemy is here to besiege us," Yang Buhui said with a cold laugh, "We, father and daughter, are at the point of death. Most likely you, this little maid, were sent by the enemy to the Brightness Peak as a spy, are you not? How can we, father and daughter, let ourselves be tortured by you? Today I will kill you first!" While saying that, she flipped her sword to stab the young maid's neck.

When he saw the young maid was deformed, Zhang Wuji felt compassion toward her; now that he suddenly saw Yang Buhui's sword went straight to stab her, in this critical situation he did not have time to think, immediately he flew out and flicked the body of the sword with his finger. Yang Buhui was not able to hold her sword. 'Clink clank!' the sword fell to the floor. As soon as the sword left her right hand, her two fingers went straight toward Zhang Wuji's two eyes. It was actually a very common, mediocre stance called the 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fight over a pearl], but since she had been under her father's tutelage for several years, the stance came out rather powerful. Zhang Wuji leaped backward to evade and blurted, "Buhui Meimei [younger sister], it's me!"

Yang Buhui was accustomed to him calling her 'Buhui Meimei', four characters; she was startled. "Wuji Gege [big brother]?" she asked. She only recognized the intonation of the call 'Buhui Meimei', but she did not recognize Zhang Wuji's appearance.

Immediately Zhang Wuji felt a pang of regret in his heart; but he could not deny again. "It's me!" he had no choice but answered in affirmative. "Buhui Meimei, how have you been these past several years?"

Yang Buhui looked at him intently, but when she saw a man in ragged clothes and filthy face, she was startled and felt uneasy. "You ... you ... really are Wuji Gege? How ... how did you get in here?" she asked.

"It was Shuo Bude who took me up the Brightness Peak," Zhang Wuji replied, "After that Yuan Zhen Heshang entered this room, he disappeared suddenly. Is there any other way out from here?"

"What Yuan Zhen Heshang?" Yang Buhui was confused, "Who entered this room?"

Zhang Wuji was anxious to chase after Yuan Zhen; he did not want to start explaining a long story. He simply said, "Your father is injured in the hall, you'd better take a look quickly."

Yang Buhui was shocked. "I'll go look at Father," she hastily said, but then suddenly with a great force her palm shot down on the top of the young maid's head.

"No, don't!" Zhang Wuji cried out in fear as he reached out to push her arm so that Yang Buhui's palm came down on empty air.

Twice Yang Buhui tried to kill that young maid, but both times Zhang Wuji intervened. "Wuji Gege," she said sternly, "Is this girl your companion?"

Zhang Wuji was baffled. "She is your maidservant," he said, "I met her just now, how can she be my companion?"

"If you do not know the real story, then do not meddle in other people's business," Yang Buhui said, "This maidservant is our family's big enemy. My Father put shackles on her hands and feet exactly to prevent her from harming me. Right now the enemy is coming to attack in large numbers, this maid is going to take this opportunity to strike back."

Zhang Wuji saw that this young maid was tender and pitiful; although her appearance was rather unusual, she did not look like a fiendish person. "Miss," he said, "Do you have any intention to take this opportunity to strike back?"

The young maid shook her head. "Certainly not," she said.

Zhang Wuji said, "Buhui Meimei, did you hear? She said 'Certainly no'. Please spare her!"

"Very well," Yang Buhui said, "Since you ask on her behalf, aiyo ..." suddenly her body leaned sideways and swayed, her legs shaky.

Zhang Wuji hastily reached out to support her, but suddenly he felt pain on the 'xuan shu' [hanging hinge/pivot] and 'zhong shu' [hub/center], two acupoints on his lower back, and he tumbled forward.

Turned out Yang Buhui did not like him keep stopping her; she lured him to come near, and then using the iron ring on her middle finger she struck his two major acupoints on his back to overthrow him, followed by her right hand slapped backhandedly toward the young maid's right-hand 'taiyang xue' [sun acupoint, on the temple]. But before the strike hit, Yang Buhui felt her 'dantian' fiery hot while her whole body went numb so that she did not have any choice but release the young maid's wrist in her hand. Her knees buckled and she fell down, sitting on the chair.

What happened was: when with her entire strength she struck Zhang Wuji's acupoints, although the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi had not completely protected his body since he had just mastered it, it automatically reacted against the external stimulation and heavily shook the arteries and veins in Yang Buhui's entire body.

The young maid picked the sword lying on the floor and said, "Xiaojie, you always suspect me of harming you. If I wanted to kill you right now, it would be as easy as blowing dust; but I do not have this kind of intention." Finished speaking, she returned the sword back to its sheath and hang it on the wall.

Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "Did you see that? I was right!" As soon as his acupoints were sealed, he used the real 'chi' inside his body to flush the obstructed blood vessels and very soon he was able to move again.

Yang Buhui looked at him helplessly, with a great astonishment in her heart. By this time the numbness in her hands and feet had vanished. Remembering her father's safety, she stood up and said, "How is my Father's injury? Wuji Gege, wait for me here, I will be back to see you. How have you been these past several years? I remembered you often ..." She kept talking while rushing out the room.

"Miss," Zhang Wuji asked the young maid, "That monk escaped to this room and suddenly disappeared. Do you know any other way out from here?"

"Do you really have to pursue him?" the young maid asked.

"This monk has offended the Heaven and defied reason," Zhang Wuji replied, "He has committed innumerable crimes. I ... I ... must pursue him even to the ends of the earth."

The young maid looked up to stare at his face. Zhang Wuji said, "Miss, if you know, please show me the way."

The young maid bit her lower lip and hesitated for a moment. "You have saved my life," she said in low voice, "All right, I'll take you." She blew the candle out and pulled Zhang Wuji's hand away.

End of Chapter 19.

Chapter 20 - Help From the Son To Fight the Enemies*

(Trsnslated by Meh)

Not sure if I got the title of the chapter correct. Really hard to figure out.



Xiao Zhao sat on the ground and began to sing again. When she sang about the 'In the end, you can't escape fate,' Zhang Wuji thought that in the past, he has never cared much for life and death. Before, his death would never affect anyone else. Yet today, he not only pulled in this innocent girl to die with him, but also would die not knowing what would happen to the Ming sect, to the safety of Yang Xiao and Yang BuHui, the revenge of his godfather. Unlike previous occasions, he really didn't want to simply die at this moment.

Zhang Wuji followed her a few steps, towards the bed. That little servant girl opened the curtains and got on the bed, still holding Zhang Wuji's hand. Zhang Wuji became shocked, thinking that although this servant girl is very ugly, she's still a girl. How can he be in the same bed with her? Besides, he needs to chase the enemy. So he took his hands off of hers. That servant girl said quietly, "The secret entrance is on the bed!" When he heard these words, he gathered himself, and forgot all about the fact that man and woman should be apart. As he saw her opened the covers and lied on the bed, he followed suit. The girl then pushed some sort of switch, the bed shook, and the two of them fell down. Although it was a drop of several meters, padding on the ground broke their fall. So he felt no pain. Only to hear a loud thud, as the bed reverted to its original position. He thought, "This entrance really is exquisite. Who would've thought that the entrance would be on the bed of the young lady's room?" He held the servant girl's hand and ran forward quickly, only to hear the chains on the servant girl's legs drag on the ground. He suddenly remembered, "This girl's legs are crippled, so how can she keep up?" He immediately stopped. That girl figured out what he was thinking, and said with a smile, "I was faking my cripple in front of master and the young lady." Zhang Wuji thought, "No wonder my mom told me that all women lie, even Sister Bu Hui sneaked up on

me today.” But with his mortal enemy ahead, he stopped thinking about it, and continued to run forward. They quickly reached the end of the path. Yet he could not see Yuan Zhen.

That servant girl said, “I’ve been here before. Although I’m sure there’s more to this path, I have never found the switch to open it.” Zhang Wuji held his hand out and searched around. He tried to push at different parts of cave walls, but couldn’t move them. That servant girl said, “I’ve tried tens of times. Never did find a secret switch. So where could that monk have gone?”

Zhang Wuji sighed, gathered his chi, pushing the left side of the wall, with no success. Then he pushed the right side, and saw the wall move a bit. He was ecstatic, and immediately gathered in two more breath of chi. This time he pushed open the door. This door is actually the best kind of secret door. There’s no hidden switch. But if you don’t have an amazing amount of inner strength, it’s impossible to open. Now that Zhang Wuji has learned the complete Jiu Yang Shen Gong*, his push utilized a tremendous amount of energy, so obviously the door opened. After opening the door a few inches, Zhang Wuji pushed out his palm into the opening, to prevent Yuan Zhen from sneaking up behind the door, then slid through the opening. A new long path opened up. As the two people ran forward, they felt the path going downward. After running for about 50 meters or so, they came upon a branch with seven paths. Just as Zhang Wuji wondered which way they should go, he heard a light cough from the left side. Although low and short, the sound was obvious when heard inside such a quiet place.

*Jiu Yang Shen Gong is the inner power kung fu Zhang Wuji learned from reading [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing].

Zhang Wuji said quietly, “This way!” Then followed the left-

most path, This path is very uneven, sometimes going up, sometimes going down, only to hear the clanking of the chains behind him. He turned around and said, "It's dangerous ahead, why don't you slow down as I go on ahead?" That servant girl said, "If there's danger, we'll face it together. What's there to be afraid of?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Are you lying to me too?" but then kept going, following the left path every single time. The path suddenly became steeper and steeper, until it seemingly became a well. Suddenly, he felt a huge wind pushing from behind, immediately grabbed that girl's waist, then dashed quickly downward. Whether it's a bottomless pit down there or a hard wall, he never thought about it. Thankfully there was a room down there for them to fall into. Only to hear a loud thud, as dirt and pebbles landed on their face. Zhang Wuji gathered himself, and heard the servant girl say, "That was close. The old bastard hid to the side, then tried to kill us using a boulder." Zhang Wuji went to where the boulder got stuck to, and heard Yuan Zhen's voice from behind, "You little bastard, today you get to be buried alive here, but at least you have a girl to die with you. So consider yourself lucky. I don't care how much strength you have, do you really think you can push this boulder? If that's not enough, how about another one?" Only to hear another stone falling down, on top of the last one. Zhang Wuji tried to find any holes he might go through, but couldn't fit anything more than an arm. He gathered some chi and pushed, but while the stones shook, they didn't budge. With thousands of pounds of stone, not even his Jiu Yang Shen Gong can break through. Only to hear Yuan Zhen breathing heavily, asking, "Little boy... what's.... your... name...?" After he said 'name', he couldn't speak anymore.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Even if he wanted to save us, he can't now. No need to keep talking to him." He then started to walk

around, looking for other exits. The servant girl said, "I have some flint and tinder, but no torch to use it on." Zhang Wuji said, "No need for fire yet." He started to search around, finally finding a torch. He said happily, "I got it!" He found lots of dust on it, but doesn't know what it really is. Picking up the wood, he said, "Here, light the fire." The servant girl took out her things to light the torch, which caught fire extremely quickly, and sparks flew around. The two people were both shocked, and they began to smell something stinky. That servant girl said, "It's gunpowder!" Then raised the torch, looking closely at the contents of the nearby chest, filled with gunpowder. She chuckled quietly and said, "If we had lit the fire here, I bet even that old monk would've been blown up by now." Only to see Zhang Wuji staring intently at herself, his expression filled with surprise. So she said with a smile, "What's wrong with you?" Zhang Wuji sighed, "So you're... you're this beautiful?" That servant girl curled her lips with a smile, "Oops. I was so scared that I forgot to put on my ugly expression." As she said this, she stretched her body. It turns out that she wasn't a cripple, nor a hunchback, nor even ugly. In fact, she really is incredibly beautiful, except she's still a bit young, so she's not fully developed. Zhang Wuji asked, "Why do you pretend to be like that then?"

That servant girl said, "The young lady really hates me, but when she sees my ugly look, she becomes happy. If I don't act like this, she would've killed me a long time ago. Zhang Wuji asked, "Why does she want to kill you?" That servant girl said, "She kept thinking that I'm scheming to kill her and old master." Zhang Wuji shook his head, said, "She really worries too much. When you had the sword in your hand earlier, and she couldn't move, you didn't kill her. So from now on, she won't distrust you again." That servant girl said, "Young lady will only get more suspicious now that I've taken you here. But we don't even know if we can get out of here, so I won't worry about that for now." As she said this, she

held the torch high up into the air, scanning the area. Weapons filled this stone room. As they checked the area once more, they saw no signs of another path. Obviously, Yuan Zhen's cough is to lure them into this room.

The servant girl said, "Young master, my name is Xiao Zhao. I heard the young lady call you 'Brother Wuji', does this mean your name is Wuji?" Zhang Wuji said, "That's right. My surname is Zhang..." He then got an idea, and picked up a spear. He tested its weight, seeing that it's quite heavy, about 50 pounds. He said, "These gunpowder just might just save our lives. Let's see if they can crack the boulders." Xiao Zhao clapped her hands, "Great idea!" As she clapped, the chains on her wrists clanked together. Zhang Wuji said, "These chains are really bothersome. Let me take them off."

Xiao Zhao said alarmingly, "No! Master will be very mad." Zhang Wuji said, "Just tell him I broke the chain. I'm not scared of him at all." As he said this, he pulled on the chains. Those chains are only about the thickness of chopsticks, and Zhang Wuji applied at least four to five hundred pounds of force, yet the chains did not break. He took a deep breath, then applied more force, yet still couldn't break the chains. Xiao Zhao said, "These chains are very strange, even sharp swords and sabers can't break it. The key is in the young lady's possession." Zhang Wuji nodded, "If we get out of here, I'll ask her to unlock the chains for you." Xiao Zhao said, "I'm afraid she wouldn't consent." Zhang Wuji said, "She and I are very close friends, so she'll definitely listen to me." As he said this he picked up the spear again, walked over to the boulders, then stopped. When he did not hear Yuan Zhen's breathing, he stuck the spear into the crack, trying to make a little hole. He put a bunch of gunpowder into the hole, then used some gunpowder to make a path into the room.

He took the torch from Xiao Zhao, and she immediately put her hands over her ears. Zhang Wuji shielded her as he lit the gunpowder, and a huge explosion followed, prompting him to fall back two steps, but Xiao Zhao began to fall down. However, Zhang Wuji prepared for this, and held on to her waist tightly. The smoke filled the room. The torch blew out.

Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, are you alright?" Xiao Zhao coughed a few times, then said, "I... I'm fine." Zhang Wuji heard some stutter in her voice, and thought it was odd. He lit the torch again, and saw her eyes all red. So he asked, "What happened? Do you feel uncomfortable?" Xiao Zhao said, "Young master Zhang, you... you and I are just strangers, why are you so good to me?" Zhang Wuji found this question strange, and said, "Why do you say that?" Xiao Zhao said, "Why did you shield me? I'm just a worthless servant, you... your health is much more precious. There's no reason to do that."

Zhang Wuji chuckled, said, "What's so precious about me? You're just a little girl, of course I should protect you."

The smoke clear out a bit, so he walked over to the boulders, only to see them still there, with simply a small crack adding to the side. Zhang Wuji sighed. "Looks like we need repeat this at least seven or eight more times before we can get through. Yet there's only enough powder for two more blows. He started to randomly poke at the boulder with the spear. As he did this, he accidentally poked the side of the nearby wall, and some stone fell off. Surprised and happy, he immediately went and pushed down more blocks, revealing another path. While the gunpowder didn't break apart the boulders. It did soften the wall by it.

He entered the new path, and then asked Xiao Zhao to come through. This time, he held up the spear in front of him to

guard from Yuan Zhen. After walking a while, they came upon another stone door. Zhang Wuji gave the torch to Xiao Zhao and pushed open this one. The next room looks bigger. As he took the torch from Xiao Zhao again, he scanned the area, seeing two skeletons on the floor, a woman and a man.

Xiao Zhao became really scared, and held on to his side. Zhang Wuji raised the torch again and searched the area, said, "Looks like another dead end. I wonder if we'll ever find an exit." He started to poke the walls with his spear, but with no success. None of the walls are hollow.

He walked close to the two skeletons, saw that the woman held a dagger in her hand. The dagger apparently pierced into her body. He immediately remembered Yuan Zhen's story. Yuan Zhen and Lady Yang met secretly here, and Yang DingTian found out. In his anger, Yang DingTian got fire deviation and died. Lady Yang then followed her husband by committing suicide.

"Could this be the Yang couple?" he thought. As he walked up to the man, he saw the hand holding a piece of sheepskin. Zhang Wuji picked it up, looked at it, and saw that it's blank. But Xiao Zhao quickly took it from him, and her face started to be filled with happiness. She said, "Congratulations, this is the Ming sect's most powerful kung fu manual." As she spoke, she made a cut on her finger with Lady Yang's dagger, spreading her blood onto the skin. Slowly words appeared, the first line said, "The Ming sect Holy Fire manual, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi." Although Zhang Wuji accidentally found the powerful Ming sect kung fu manual, he felt no happiness. He thought, "This room has no food or water. If we don't leave, we'll last no more than seven to eight days. Since we're going to die here, no kung fu is useful." He stared at the skeletons again, wondering, "Why didn't Yuan Zhen take this manual? That's right, he probably felt bad about the whole

thing, and was too scared to visit the Yang couple. Of course, there's no way he would know that the sheepskin was the kung fu manual. Or he would've definitely taken it." Zhang Wuji then asked Xiao Zhao, "How do you know the secret of this sheepskin?" Xiao Zhao lowered her head, said, "I overheard the master speaking about it with the young lady, They're both members of the Ming sect, so they can't come down here to look for it." Zhang Wuji looked at the skeletons again, and said, "Let's bury them." So they put the bones together and gathered some dirt to cover them. As they did so, Xiao Zhao picked up something. "Young Master Zhang, there's a letter here." Zhang Wuji took the letter, and saw the words "To my wife" on it. He said, "Looks like Lady Yang killed herself before getting a chance to open the letter." He then put the letter back with their body, and was about to cover them with dirt. But Xiao Zhao said, "Wait, let's read it. Maybe it's something important left by old leader Yang."

Zhang Wuji said, "But that would be disrespectful to their bodies." Xiao Zhao said, "If he has something he wanted to do but couldn't, you can tell the young lady and master. So they can take care of it for Leader Yang." Zhang Wuji thought she's right. So he opened the letter and looked at the contents. "To my wife: After you have entered the Yang family, we have often been separated, as I have neglected you, I'm truly sorry, I hope you understand. But the thirty-second leader Yi left me in his will: when I have fully learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I will lead our troops to Persia to retrieve our Holy Fire Commandment. Although our sect originates from Persia, we are now deeply rooted here in China, and have been independent for over a hundred years. Today the Mongolians rule over our land, so we must fight them to the end, and disobey our orders from the Persian Ming sect. Once the Holy Fire Commandment enters our hand, we shall finally be able to break away from the Main sect." Zhang Wuji thought, "This old leader would disobey the main sect to

fight the Mongolians. He really is a great man.” With a feeling of admiration, he read on. “Today I finished the fourth level, but due to the event with Cheng Kun, I have fire deviated, unable to control my inner chi.” When Zhang Wuji read to here, he sighed lightly, “So Leader Yang knew about his wife and Cheng Kun’s meetings when writing this.” When he saw that Xiao Zhao wanted to ask, but was afraid, he explained the events between them. Xiao Zhao said, “I say it’s all Lady Yang’s fault. If she really loves Cheng Kun, she should’ve married him instead. But once married to Leader Yang, she should’ve stopped seeing Cheng Kun.” Zhang Wuji nodded, thought, “Although she is young, she is quite wise.” He then read on, “Today my life is near the end, and as I cannot complete Leader Yi’s will, I am a criminal of the Ming sect. My only hope is to give this letter to my wife, so she can gather the Left and Right Guard, the four Protector Lords, the head of the Five Colored Flags, so they can adhere to my will. ‘Whoever obtains the Holy Fire Commandment will become the thirty-fourth leader of the Ming sect. Anyone who disagrees will be executed immediately. The interim leader of the sect will be Xie Xun.” Zhang Wuji felt a surge in his body, and thought, “So he chose my godfather to be the next leader. My godfather is great at everything, and one of the most powerful person in the Ming sect. Unfortunately, Lady Yang did not have a chance to read this letter. Or the Ming sect would never have reached this stage of inner turmoil.” He was quite happy that Leader Yang was so appreciative of his godfather, but also felt sad at the same time. After a while, he continued to read on, “The [Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi] manual will be passed on to Xie Xun, so he can give it to the next leader. Brighten our sect, Do good deeds, Destroy evil, Uphold the righteous, spread our Holy Fire to all the people in the world. This, the new leader must adhere to.”

Zhang Wuji thought, “From the looks of this letter, the Ming sect is very righteous. So the six sects really should not be

causing trouble for the Ming sect.” Only to read further,

“ With my remaining powers, I will close off the remaining path to this room and die here with Cheng Kun. My wife can then escape with my map. Since only those who knows Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi has my energy, no one else can open this door at the ‘Wu Wang’ location. But anyone who later learns this can do so. Sincerely, Yang Ding Tian.” The last line was filled with small words, “Although my name is Ding(top) Tian(sky), I couldn’t learn much kung fu, nor could I brighten the sect, nor could I make my wife happy, I really am useless.”

On the back of the letter is a map, detailing every single door and passageway. Zhang Wuji became ecstatic, said, “So Leader Yang wanted to die with Cheng Kun here, except he couldn’t hold up long enough, dying first. But at least this means that we can now escape with this map.” He found his location on the map, then checked for the exit. Unfortunately, the only exit route is the one Yuan Zhen blocked. So it’s useless after all. Xiao Zhao said, “Don’t worry about it, young master. Maybe there’s another exit.” She took the map and examined closely, but couldn’t find anything else either. Zhang Wuji saw her disappointment, and said with a bitter smile, “Leader Yang mentioned that once one learns Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he can open the stone door. Yet only Left Guard Yang has learnt this technique, and only a tiny bit at that. Even if he’s here, we’re still probably stuck. Besides, I have no clue where this ‘Wu Wan’ position is.”

Xiao Zhao said, “Wu Wan position? That’s one location within the ‘Fu Xi sixty-four Gua’*, Let’s see, it should...” As she said this, she walked to an area in the northwest corner, then said, “It should be here.”

*Note: I looked up the web for an hour on the explanation of this particular Gua. Suffice to say I got nothing useful. Honestly, I have no knowledge of Taoism. But it doesn’t really

matter too much.

Zhang Wuji said, "Really?" He picked up a big axe from the stack of weapons, went over to the area and wiped away the dust. A crease appeared, showing a door. He thought, "Although I don't know Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I do know Jiu Yang Shen Gong. My power might be enough." So he gathered his chi and his fists shot out, pushing the door. After a long time, the door still showed no signs of movement. No matter where he positions his hands and feet, how he applied his chi, the door won't budge. After becoming sore from all the pushing, he finally stopped.

Xiao Zhao said, "Young master Zhang, you don't need to keep trying. Let me go get the rest of the gunpowder." Zhang Wuji said excitedly, "Oh, I forgot about that!" The two people put the remaining gunpowder next to the door, then let it explode. Although it blew a huge hole, it still did not penetrate the door. Zhang Wuji finally gave up, held on to Xiao Zhao's hand and said tenderly, "Xiao Zhao, it's all my fault. It's because of me that you're stuck here."

Xiao Zhao's bright eyes stared closely at Zhang Wuji, "Young master Zhang, you should be scolding me instead. If I didn't take you here, then... then you wouldn't..." She cried when she got here, and used her sleeves to wipe away her tears. After a while, she began to smile through her tears, "Since we can't leave anyway, let's not worry too much. How about I sing you a song?" Zhang Wuji really isn't in the mood to listen to a song, but he couldn't bear to say no. So he smiled and said, "Ok!" Xiao Zhao sat by his side, and began to sing.

"Things in the world are hard to describe through logic, life filled with unexpected, for nothing will keep one's interest very long, there's danger within good fortune, good fortune within danger." When Zhang Wuji heard the last phrase, he

couldn't help but think that this is how his life has been. He listened some more, hearing her soothing and clear voice. His worries became less and less, listening intently.

When Xiao Zhao was finished, Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, your song was great. Who wrote the lines to this song?" Xiao Zhao smiled, "You're just kidding. What's so great about my singing? I just heard some other people sing it, and then started singing myself. So not even I know who wrote it." Zhang Wuji then started to hum a bit himself. Xiao Zhao said, "Do you really like it, or just pretending?" Zhang Wuji laughed, "Of course I really like it. Why would I pretend?" Xiao Zhao said, "Really? Ok. I'll sing another piece." She began to sing again, "Put away your worries, don't be so bitter, even if you're beautiful today, you will still be old some day, life has always been like this, who cares for money and fame."

"In the end, you still can't escape fate. Like flowing water, what goes around comes around."

These words are very deep and felt like spoken from personal experience, very inappropriate for a young girl like Xiao Zhao. Obviously, she memorized it from listening to someone else. Although Zhang Wuji is still young, he has been through so much already in his life. He thought about the "In the end, you can't escape fate." In the past, he has never cared much for life and death. Before, his death would never affect anyone else. Yet today, he not only pulled in this innocent girl to die with him, but also would die not knowing what would happen to the Ming sect, to the safety of Yang Xiao and Yang BuHui, the revenge of his godfather. Unlike previous occasions, he really didn't want to simply die at this moment. So he stood up and tried the door again. Yet no matter how hard he tries, the door still won't budge.

It's at this time that Xiao Zhao cut open her own finger again, spreading her blood onto the sheepskin, then said, "Young master Zhang, why don't you try learning this? Perhaps you're a genius, and can therefore learn this in a short time." Zhang Wuji smiled, "The old Ming sect leaders were all some of the best martial artists in the world, yet they couldn't even learn this in a short time. How could I compare to them?"

Xiao Zhao sang in a low voice, "Learning a little bit means a little bit more knowledge. Even if it is useless, it doesn't hurt to try." Zhang Wuji chuckled, took the sheepskin from Xiao Zhao, and started reading. Only to see all the text contains information on utilizing one's chi, to make them flow easily within your body. So he followed it, and quickly finished the first level without any trouble. Then he saw the sheepskin said, "This first level requires at least seven years for experts, lesser people require fourteen years." Zhang Wuji felt strange, wondering how this can be so.

He followed by reading the second level, and felt his inner chi flow easily through his body. Then he felt as if icy particles shot out of his ten fingers, finishing the level. Yet on the parchment, it said, "Experts require seven years, lesser people require fourteen years. If you can't finish in twenty one years, you should give up, or risk fire deviation." Zhang Wuji, surprised and happy, began to learn level three. This time the words have begun to fade. Just as he was about to cut his finger, Xiao Zhao dropped her blood onto the sheepskin first. Zhang Wuji followed the directions and quickly finished level three and four. When Xiao Zhao saw that half of his face is bright red, while the other half is green, she felt scared. Yet she saw that he still has much energy, as if nothing's going on. Then when he was learning the fifth level, his faces sometimes turn red and sometimes green. When it turns green, his face becomes cold as ice. When it becomes red, sweat poured down his face.

Xiao Zhao took out a handkerchief, wanting to wipe some sweat off from him, but when it touched his forehead, she felt a shock, and thrown back, almost falling down. Zhang Wuji stood up and began to wipe his sweat with his sleeves, not really knowing what happened. He had completed level five of this kung fu. This Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi really is simply a cunning way of utilizing one's power. The basic theory lies in one's natural ability. Everyone has a huge amount of innate strength. However, most of the time, you'll never use it. Yet when there's an emergency, like when you're saving someone's life, a weak person maybe able to lift a thousand pounds. Zhang Wuji, after learning Jiu Yang Shen Gong, has more natural ability than anyone else in the world. It's just that he never received advice from experts, and therefore cannot utilize most of his abilities. This time as he learns Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his innate power finally released.

This particular kung fu is very difficult to learn. A single mistake can lead to fire deviation. This is due to the inner power requirement for utilizing the technique. For if you ask a young child to lift a hundred pound hammer, he'll fail, end up hurting himself no matter how well he grabs and lifts it. But if you ask a weightlifter to do the same, he'll accomplish it easily. The idea is easy in theory, but does not work if you don't have the means. Every older leader of the Ming sect knows this, but they all felt that if they try hard enough, they would eventually succeed. This is why Zhang Wuji could learn the skill so fast, while many people smarter than he fails. Zhang Wuji simply had enough inner power, while the others do not. After learning level five, Zhang Wuji found himself very relaxed, as if he can do many things quickly and easily. He even forgot about the door, and concentrated on level six. Two hours later, he reached level seven. Level seven is many times more difficult than level six, prompting him to think a lot before learning. But it's a good thing he is an

expert in medicine, and can figure these things out. But after finishing the majority of the text, he found his blood began to boil, his heart pounding fast. He stopped for a while, and tried again. This time, the same thing happened. He never had experienced this before while practicing. So he skipped that sentence. The next one was fine. But he could not figure out the one after that. Overall, he had to skip nineteen sentences when finished the last level. Zhang Wuji rested for a while, then put that sheepskin on the stone, and kowtowed to it. He said, "Student Zhang Wuji accidentally found this secret manual, and learned it only because I seek to live, not because I want to steal your manual. When I leave, I will use my new power only to help the Ming sect, as to thank the former leaders of the Ming sect for saving my life." Xiao Zhao also kowtowed a few times, and said quietly, "Former leaders of the Ming sect, please protect young master Zhang in his effort to rebuild the Ming sect, returning it to the glory of the past." Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "I'm not a member of the Ming sect, and because of the promise to my martial grandfather, never will be. But after reading Leader Yang's will, I know that the Ming sect really is a righteous sect. So I will do my best to arbitrate their misunderstandings with the six sects." Xiao Zhao said, "You said you couldn't finish nineteen sentences, why don't you rest and try once more?" Zhang Wuji responded, "Although I missed nineteen sentences, and feel a bit empty, but why dwell on it? I have learned so much. There's no need to ask for more."

Xiao Zhao said, "Young master's right." She took the sheepskin, asked him to point out those nineteen sentences, and memorized them. Zhang Wuji laughed, "Why are you trying to remember these?" Xiao Zhao's face became red, and said, "It's nothing, I just thought that if even you can't learn it, then it must be extremely strange."

Who would've thought that since Zhang Wuji is never

greedy, he was able to avoid major problems. For you see, the original creator of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi only learned to level six. So he can only conjecture how one should practice level seven. The nineteen sentences that Zhang Wuji skipped just happened to be mistakes that person made while writing down level seven's directions. So had Zhang Wuji continued, he would've fire deviated, perhaps losing his life.

After the two of them finished burying the Yang couple, Zhang Wuji walked over to the stone door. Following the directions of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he opened it with just one hand.

Xiao Zhao excitedly clapped her hands, praising Zhang Wuji's powers, her chain clanked together again. Zhang Wuji said, "Let me try breaking them apart again." Xiao Zhao said happily, "This time you'll definitely succeed!" Zhang Wuji held the chains between her hand, and pulled. Yet for some reason, the chains only became longer and longer, not breaking. Xiao Zhao yelled, "Wait, this isn't good. I'll be in even worse condition with a longer chain." Zhang Wuji said, "This chain really is strange." When he saw Xiao Zhao sigh, Zhang Wuji tried to make her feel better, said, "Don't worry. I promise I'll get you the key. If we can go through death together, how are some chains going to get in our way?" He wanted to find Yuan Zhen for revenge, but found that he still couldn't move those two boulders. So they left through the other door. As they got outside, both squinted their eyes, trying to adjust to the brightness. When they could see again, both saw sunlight reflecting off the snow on the ground. Xiao Zhao blew out the fire on the torch, then buried it inside the snow, and then said, "Thank you little torch. Thank you for shining the way for young master Zhang and myself. If it weren't for you, we'd be dead already."

Zhang Wuji laughed at her, but then immediately thought,

"There are so many devious people in this world, yet this little girl would even thank a torch. She must be a very kind person." So he smiled. With the snow reflecting the light onto her face, Xiao Zhao looked even more radiant, showing her great beauty. He couldn't help but say, "Wow. Xiao Zhao, you're so very pretty." Xiao Zhao said happily, "Young master Zhang, you're not lying to me, are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "Please don't pretend to be a hunchback and a cripple, I like you just like this." Xiao Zhao said, "If you tell me to be like this, I'll stay like this. Even if young lady kills me, I still won't pretend." Zhang Wuji said, "Oh, don't say that. Why would she kill you?" After looking at her some more, he found her skin especially white, her nose a bit taller, her eyes as blue as the sea. He said, "You're originally from Xi Yu*, aren't you? You have an unique attractiveness that the mid-plains girls don't have." Xiao Zhao said, "But I'd rather look like the girls from the mid-plains." As they walked further, Zhang Wuji saw some people lying on the ground to the north. Zhang Wuji said, "Let's go over there and take a look." He then held Xiao Zhao's hand and immediately started to run. Now that he has mastered the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his whole body moves effortlessly. Making the impossible seemingly easy. Even while holding another person, his movement is still quick and agile. They soon arrived at the location of the bodies. Three has the clothes of the Ming sect, while one looked like a Shaolin monk. Zhang Wuji said with shock, "Oh no! We've been in the cave for so long. The six sects might have reached the mountain top now!" He touched the bodies, and realized that they've been dead for a while. So he started to run quickly, while holding on to Xiao Zhao. Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder what has happened to Mr. Yang and Sister BuHui?" He ran faster and faster, as if carrying Xiao Zhao in midair. On the way they saw many corpses. The majority are Ming sect members, but quite a few are also among the six major sects. Obviously, without the guidance of the likes of Yang Xiao and Wei YiXiao, the Ming sect had a

lot of trouble holding off the enemy. But since they would rather die than surrender, the six sects also suffered major casualties. He suddenly heard noise of weaponry, thinking that it's a good thing the battle hasn't reached the main hall.

*Xi Yu is the location of the Ming sect. It's in the western area of china. Not sure of the exact location, though.

As he kept going on, he heard two darts from behind, and someone yelled, "Who is it? Stop!" Zhang Wuji did not slow down, simply waved his sleeves to blow away the darts. Only then did he hear a scream. He stopped, turned around, and saw a monk on the ground, with two darts on his right shoulder. Zhang Wuji felt astonished, as he did not know that a wave of his arm could have so much power behind it. He hurried to the monk and apologized, "I'm sorry that I accidentally hurt you." And then took out the two darts.

Yet this monk suddenly struck out at him, his right foot struck at Zhang Wuji's left waist. Zhang Wuji didn't expect this, and couldn't dodge it. Yet for some reason that monk instead bounced away, hitting a tree behind him. His right foot broken, his mouth filled with blood. By now, the chi inside Zhang Wuji is even more fluid, so his defense power was much better than when Jing Xuan* kicked him That's why the monk's injury was much severe.

*This happened right before ZWJ took the three palms from Mie Jui. Jing Xuan is the top disciple of Mie Jui.

When Zhang Wuji saw this, he felt even worse. He tried to go up and apologize again, but that monk only looked at him venomously. Hearing more noise coming from afar, he stopped caring for the monk. Picking up Xiao Zhao, Zhang Wuji immediately darted to the location of the sound. After going through the front door, he passed two buildings, and

finally into a large square. The square is filled with people. The people on the west are less in numbers, and most are wounded. The people on the east are separated into six groups, with a lot more in numbers. Zhang Wuji saw the likes of Yang Xiao, Wei YiXiao, Monk Peng, and Shuo BuDe* all in the Ming group. From the looks of it, they still have trouble moving. Yang BuHui sat by her dad's side. In the middle of the square, two people are fighting. As everyone's attention is on the fight, no one them. Zhang Wuji got closer to see clearly. He saw that both combatants used bare fists, but their strikes carried the wind, power unimaginable. Obviously both people are two of the top fighters in the world. Those two people's body moved quickly, their strokes extremely fast. Then suddenly, the four palms struck each other, all movement stopped immediately in a flash. The spectators all yelled together, "Great!"

*For those who don't remember them, Wei YiXiao is the Green Bat King. Shou BuDe(Can't Say) is the person who carried ZWJ in his sack. Monk Peng is another member of the 'Wu San Ren',

Zhang Wuji was shocked when he saw the faces of the combatants. The short middle-aged man with a determined face is Wu Dang's fourth hero Zhang SongXi. His opponent is an old man, whose long brows look whiter than snow, his nose crooked, like an eagle's beak. Zhang Wuji thought, "Since when did the Ming sect have another person this powerful? Who is he?" Suddenly, he heard someone in the Hua Shan sect scream, "Old man white-brow, give up now, how can you be a match for the fourth hero of Wu Dang?" When Zhang Wuji heard the name 'old man white-brow', he immediately figured it out, "Oh, so he... he's my grandfather. White-browed Eagle King!" He wanted to go up and embrace him. But they're still matching inner strength as of right now. On one side you have one of the Ming sect's Four Great

Protection Lords, on the other you have one of Zhang SanFeng's top student. As the battle seemingly near the end, both sides started to hold their breath, concerned for their own side's fighter. This battle is not only a match between Wu Dang and the Ming sect, but the fighters' healths are at risk too. Only to see both people still as statues. Zhang SongXi knows that Yin TianZheng has twenty extra years of inner power cultivation, but he has the advantage of youth and a body in his prime. He didn't realize that Ying TianZheng is a prodigy at martial arts. Although he is quite old, his body still has the stamina of a youngster. Waves of chi strikes came continuously at Zhang SongXi. When Zhang Wuji first saw them, his reaction was pure joy. But that soon turned to worry. One is his grandfather. One is his dad's martial brother, who treated him like a son. When he was still suffering from Xuan Ming Palm, all the Wu Dang heroes took turns sacrificing their own inner power to prolong his life. No matter who dies, he would be deeply miserable.

Just as he was about to go break up the fight, both Yin TianZheng and Zhang SongXi yelled, the four palms broke apart, and each person retreated six to seven steps. Zhang SongXi said, "Elder Yin's power is simply amazing. You have my admiration." Ying TianZheng said, "Brother Zhang's inner power skill has no equal, I must say that mine is no match. You are the martial brother of my son-in-law. Do we really have to fight to the death here?" When Zhang Wuji heard him talk about his father, his head kept yelling, "Stop! Stop!" Zhang SongXi said, "I retreated one more step than you did, so I admit defeat." After bowing, he retreated to his group.

Suddenly another person came out from the Wu Dang sect. He pointed at Yin TianZheng, "Old man Ying, if you hadn't brought up my fifth brother, I would have let that slide. But my third and fifth brother were both injured because of your Heavenly Eagle sect. If I don't have my revenge here, I don't

think we would deserve our nickname of the 'Seven Wu Dang Heroes'." As he spoke, his sword came out. Under the bright sun the sword sparkled as he moved into the starting 'Wan Yue Chao Zong' position. This is the normal Wu Dang position when dueling against elders. Although Muo ShengGu is incredibly angry, he still did not lose his cool in front of the masses. Making sure he pays the proper respect to an elder. Yin TianZheng sighed, as his face showed much sadness. "After my daughter died, I stopped caring to use swords. But if I face your sword with bare fists, that would be too disrespectful." He pointed to a Ming member who uses the iron staff, "Can I borrow your staff for a moment?" That Ming member presented it to him with both hands. Yin TianZheng took the iron staff, and then use his hand to break it in two.

All the spectators 'wowed' at that action. No one thought that after so many fights, this old man still have such amazing strength. Muo ShengGu knows that he won't attack first, so his long sword rose, attacked with the stroke 'Hundred Bird Flying in the Wind'. Only to see the sword point move in different directions, suddenly changing into tens of sword point, aiming towards the opponents mid area. Although this stroke is very powerful, it's still a very respectful stroke. Yin TianZheng blocked with his left broken staff, and said, "You don't have to be so respectful." And followed by a counter with his right broken staff. After several moves, they saw that Muo ShengGu's swords strokes are incredibly elegant, agile, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, really is befitting of a major sect. Yin TianZheng's staff is already quite heavy, and his strokes look quite dumb and ordinary. But in the eyes of the experts, they see that his martial arts has reached an astonishingly high level. His steps are also quite slow and unmethodical. Muo ShengGu attacked from all directions, in just a few moments, he has unleashed over sixty lethal attacks.

After some time, Muo ShengGu's strokes became faster and faster. Kun Lun and Er Mei has long been known for their sword art, but they too were amazed at just how powerful Muo ShengGu's sword art is, thinking, "Wu Dang's fame really is quite deserving. Really glad to see it today." Yet no matter how hard he tries, Muo ShengGu still could not break through Yin TianZheng's blockade of two broken staffs. He thought, "This person had already fought three top fighters of Shaolin, plus he wasted much energy while matching palms with fourth brother He's already at a severe disadvantage. If I can't beat him now, where's the face for our sect?" He suddenly changed his sword form, as the long sword seemingly became a strand of silk, light as a feather, flowing effortlessly up and down. This is Wu Dang's seventy-two stroke 'Finger Spinning Soft Sword'. After twenty or so attacks, Yin TianZheng could no longer stand fairly still, and began to utilize his lightness kung fu, matching him speed for speed. Suddenly he saw Muo ShengGu's sword came aiming at his chest, yet in the middle, it suddenly changed directions, aiming towards his right shoulder. Yin TianZheng hurriedly tried to dodge this, yet for some reason, the sword bounced back to its original direction, striking YinTianZheng's left shoulder. Yin TianZheng's shot out his right hand, grabbed Muo ShengGu's wrist, twisted it, and grabbed his sword. His left hand then grabbed his 'Jian Zhen Point'. White-browed Eagle King's Eagle Claws is unrivaled in the martial world. If he simply applied a bit more pressure, Muo ShengGu's bones would crack, and forever be crippled. The other Wu Dang heroes wanted to go up and save him, but knew it's too late.

Yin TianZheng sighed, said, "Why bother..." and released his grip. His right hand took the sword out of his left shoulder, and blood came pouring out. He said, "You know, in my whole life, I have never been beaten in terms of techniques. Zhang SanFeng really is incredible!" He was commenting that he

could not block Wu Dang's 'Finger Spinning Soft Sword'. Muo ShengGu stared at the ground. Although he did deliver the first blow, he lost at the end. After a moment, he said, "Thank you for not taking my life." Yin TianZheng did not speak, returning the sword to him. Muo ShengGu had always been a prodigy at the sword art. He felt terrible that his sword was taken, and couldn't bring himself to accept it before backing down. Zhang Wuji ripped a piece of sleeve from his shirt, about to go treat his grandpa's injuries. But the top hero of the Wu Dang sect, Song YuanQiao, came out first and said, "I'll treat your injuries." He then took out some blood-stopping medicine, and covered up his wound. Heavenly Eagle sect and the Ming sect both saw his righteousness expression, knows that he wouldn't try to hurt Yin TianZheng in the process. Yin TianZheng said, "Thank you!" Zhang Wuji became ecstatic, thinking, "My uncle Song treated grandpa's wounds for not taking uncle Muo's life. I bet they'll stop fighting now." Who would've thought that after patching his wounds, Song YuanQiao backed off a bit and said, "I will now challenge you to another duel!" This really is something Zhang Wuji did not expect, and he immediately blurted out, "Hero Song. This is not fair that you're all fighting him one after the other!"

As he said this, everyone turned towards him. Other than a few, like the Er Mei sect, Yang Xiao, Song QingShu, Yin LiTing, and others, no one else knows who he is.

Song YuanQiao said, "This boy is correct. Although Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle sect are enemies, we're here to fight the Ming sect. So our differences can wait."

Yin TianZheng looked back to his group, seeing Wei YiXiao, Yang Xiao, and the others still heavily wounded, his own son unconscious. Other than himself, no one else can possibly put up a fight against Song YuanQiao. But after fighting five

times already, his energy has mostly been depleted. Besides, this shoulder wound really is quite severe.

Just as he was thinking these things, an old, short man came out from the Kong Dong sect. He said, "Since you've lost already, why don't you just surrender now? Reverend Kong Zhi, let's go burn the place!" Kong Zhi is the leader of the Shaolin group that came to fight the Ming sect. The others all look up to him for guidance.

Before Kong Zhi could respond, someone in the Hua Shan sect said, "Who cares whether they surrender or not? Just kill them all." Yin TianZheng tried to recover some strength, but he felt sharp pain on the shoulders. He knew that Song YuanQiao is the eldest disciple under Zhang SanFeng. Even at full strength, he's not sure if he can win. Yet with everyone else injured or dead, he's the only one who can put up any resistance. So his only choice is to fight to the end. Although he's not afraid of death, but to lose everything he's worked for is hard to take. Song YuanQiao then said, "Elder Yin, although Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect are enemies, that is not the purpose of this visit. We are here to fight the Ming sect. Since you have already left the Ming sect, you really don't have to be here. If you leave now, we won't stop you."

Everyone knows the story about Heavenly Eagle sect harming Yu DaiYan* to become the enemy of Wu Dang. So everyone was surprised to hear Song YuanQiao say these words. But they also know that Song YuanQiao is a righteous person, and doesn't want to take advantage of him." Yin TianZheng laughed, "I thank your kindness. But I am one of the Great Protection Lords of the Ming sect. How can I ignore the Ming sect when it's in trouble? I can only die defending today." As he said this he stepped up, his hands by his shoulders. Song YuanQiao said, "If that's the case, then I'm

sorry!” As he said this, his hands shot out, using the move ‘Qing Shou Shi’. This is Wu Dang’s opening palm move against elders, again to show respect. Yin TianZheng said, “No need.” And moved his hands in position to block. Although in order to facilitate this strike, Song YuanQiao needed to move up another step, but instead he did not move his feet. So this palm is still inches from Yin TianZheng’s body.

*Yu DaiYan is the third brother of Wu Dang, who was poisoned and sent back by Yin SuSu.

Yin TianZheng thought, “Could it be that his palm is so powerful it can hit through air?” He doesn’t want to take the chance, and used his chi onto his right palm to meet the opponent. But for some reason, Song YuanQiao’s palm did not carry any extra inner power with it. Just as he was wondering what’s going on, Song YuanQiao said, “My master heard your inner power cultivation is one of the best in the world. However, after battling so many people, it’s unfair for someone as fresh as me to fight you. So let’s just compete in techniques, not inner power.” As he said this, his foot shot out. Although it did not aim at the opponent, it’s still precise and quick, making it difficult to block had he used it for real. Yin TianZheng said, “Great!” He decided to use attack as defense. Trying to gain the initiative. Song YuanQiao dodged left and right before returning a palm. Although they’re not touching each other, they both know what the results of each strike and counters were.

The spectators include many top martial artists. They see that Song YuanQiao used soft to counter hard, his movement incredibly fast. Yin TianZheng’s style is pure power, yet he also kept up the speed. Only to see both attack and defend quickly. Although seemingly like two people practicing, they are actually in a very heated battle.

When Zhang Wuji first saw Yin TianZheng fought Zhang SongXi and Muo ShengGu, he cared too much for their safety to actually look at their fighting style. But now that there's no worry about anyone's lives, he can concentrate on their techniques. Yet the more he watched, the more he doesn't get it. "My grandfather and Uncle Song are two of the best fighters in the world, so are there so many flaws in their moves? If grandpa only aimed that last attack a bit left, he would've hit Uncle Song's chest. If Uncle Song had held back this attack a bit longer, he would've hit my grandpa's shoulders. Could it be that they're purposely holding back? But that doesn't seem to be the case." In actuality, both Yin TianZheng and Song YuanQiao are fighting with all their concentration. But after learning Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his abilities have raised another notch. There are many flaws in Song and Yin's moves, but also none. The only reason Zhang Wuji thinks this way is because of Jiu Yang Shen Gong. His methods for beating the enemy might succeed, but certainly no better than the ones Yin and Song are using. Because no one else can use them. It's the same as a bird watching a lion fight a tiger, thinking why doesn't one just fly up and attack from above? Although lions and tigers are powerful, they still cannot fly. Zhang Wuji is hardly knowledgeable about these things, so he couldn't figure it out. Suddenly he saw Song YuanQiao's moves changed, his hands danced in the air, soft and without power. This is Wu Dang's 'Soft Palms'. Yin TianZheng still used his same palm style. One trying to counter soft, while the other trying to counter hard.

In the middle of the fight, Song YuanQiao attacked with his left hand, his right hand followed, but attacked faster. Then his left hand then reached around and caught up with the right hand. Yin TianZheng could not find a way to escape, so he shot out both of his palms forward. Their palms facing each other, and stopped moving. At this moment, there's

nothing to do but to match inner strength. Except their palms did not meet. Song YuanQiao smiled, putting down his arms, said, "Your palm really is quite magnificent. You have my admiration!" Yin TianZheng also took back his palms and said, "Wu Dang's palm art really is the best in the world." They agreed not to match inner powers, so they had to stop here. Wu Dang still has Yu LianZhou and Yin LiTing still available, but Yin TianZheng's face became red, sweat pouring down his body. Although it was not an inner power match, the opponent was too strong. So he had to waste a lot of strength anyway. At this moment, no matter which other Wu Dan hero comes forward, they would easily win, and become famous for defeating the White-browed Eagle King. Yin LiTing and Yu LianZhou looked at each other, both shook their head, thinking, "How can we possibly fight an injured person?"

Although they wouldn't step forward, it doesn't mean others would follow suit. A small man from Kong Dong stepped forward and said, "Let me play around with you a bit!" His voice full of disrespect.

Yin TianZheng thought, "Ordinarily, they're not even worth fighting me. But now the situation is different. Had I died in the hands of Wu Dang, it wouldn't have been too bad. But how can I let you Tan WenLiang achieve this fame?" Although he felt dizzy, he still gathered his strength to stand up. "Little guy, go ahead!" Tang WenLiang saw that his energy has been mostly depleted, that if he simply wait a bit longer, Yin TianZheng will probably collapse himself. So he quickly got behind Yin TianZheng, aiming towards the back of his heart. Yin TianZheng turned to block, but Tang WenLiang had already left his original spot, moving around like a monkey, not giving him a good target. After a while, Yin TianZheng's eyes saw only black, his mouth coughed some blood, and fell down. Tang WenLiang excitedly said, "Yin TianZheng, today

you'll die in my hands!" He jumped down to attack. Zhang Wuji saw what's going on, began to help, but then saw Yin TianZheng's right hand reached up, using a perfect technique against an attack from above, grabbed Tang WenLiang's arm. Followed by two ka-cha sounds, as his Eagle Claw broke Tang WenLiang's shoulders, followed by his two legs. Tang WenLiang fell to the ground, unable to get up. People all felt awe that he was able to do such a thing in such condition. Members of the Kong Dong sect all looked pale. Although they're close to Tang WenLiang, none dared to go up and retrieve him. After a while, a tall person from the Kong Dong sect came out, picked up a stone, and threw it at Yin TianZheng. This is Zong WeiXia, the second Kong Dong elder. He said, "Old man White-brow. Let's take care of some old business." This stone shot over and hit Yin TianZheng on the face, blood came out. Everyone became shocked, as no one thought it would actually hit him. But apparently, in his semi-conscious state, Yin TianZheng couldn't even see the stone coming, much less avoid it. At this moment, almost anyone could go up and kill him. But before Zong WeiXia can do anything, a person came out from the Wu Dang sect. This is the second Wu Dang hero Yu LianZhou. He said, "Brother Zong, he's already very injured. To kill him now is a terrible thing to do. Since he and us Wu Dang has some issues, why don't you leave him to me?" Zong WeiXia said, "What injury? He's faking it. Otherwise, how could he cripple my third brother?" I have to hit him three times for revenge." Yu LianZhou didn't want such a heroic person to die in such circumstances, and then thought of Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, said, "Your Qi Shang Fist is world famous, how can he stand three blows?"

Zong WeiXia said, "Fine then. He crippled my brother. I'll just cripple him. Eye for an eye!" He saw disagreement on Yu LianZhou's face, then said, "Second hero Yu, we came here to take out evil. How can you protect them instead?" Yu

LianZhou sighed, said, "Fine then. But when we get back, let me test out your Qi Shang Fist." Zong WeiXia thought, "Why is he protecting this old man?" Although he's afraid of Wu Dang, he couldn't show it in front of the masses. So he laughed coldly, "Nothing in this world is above the word 'reason'. Although you're powerful, you still cannot use it to force others to agree with you."

Song YuanQiao said, "Second brother, let it go." Yu LianZhou said, "Great hero! Great man!" Then left. These words are obviously meant to praise Yin TianZheng. Zong WeiXia doesn't want to make enemies of Wu Dang, so he pretended to not hear it. Once Yu LianZhou left, he went towards Yin TianZheng.

Shaolin's Kong Zhi started yelling orders, "Kong Dong and Hua Shan people. Finish the remaining people. Wu Dang, search left for those in hiding. Er Mei go right and do the same. Kun Lun, get some fire and burn this place. Shaolin disciples, prepare to guide the dead on their journey." Everyone thought that after Yin TianZheng dies, they can go on destroying the place. And the plan will be a success. All the Ming sect members who weren't terribly injured raised their arms, ten fingers apart, holding them in front of their chest. They then followed Yang Xiao in saying the sacred Ming text, "Come to me, Oh holy fire, What joy is in life, what pain in death, for righteousness against evil, happiness and sadness, as we return to earth, hopefully the living, will receive happiness." Everyone chanted along, seemingly feel nothing about dying.

Yu LianZhou thought, "This must be their sacred chant before they die. That really is righteous of them. Actually, the Ming sect used to be filled with heroes. It's just that recently, many members have become evil." Zhang Wuji originally was afraid to appear in front of so many elders of the six sects.

But after Kong Zhi said those commands, and Zong WeiXia now walking towards Yin TianZheng, he can't possibly hold back. Without thinking, he jumped in front of Zong WeiXia, said, "Hold on! How can do this to such an injured person? You're not afraid that people will laugh?" He said these words loud and clear. Although everyone was intent on doing their duties, they all turned around when they heard this. When Zong WeiXia saw that it's a youngster with a dirty shirt talking, he ignored him, and tried to push him away. Zhang Wuji saw Zong WeiXia trying to push himself, so he lightly held out with his palm, after a 'peng' sound, Zong WeiXia fell back three steps. Tried to get his balance back, but this push really is too strong. So every time he desperately to regain his balance, he fails. So he had to retreat further a few steps before getting back up. By that time, he's already quite far from Zhang Wuji. His mind couldn't explain what happened, while the others wonder what he's doing. Even Zhang Wuji himself didn't realize how much power he had. Zong WeiXia thought for a moment, and then said to Yu LianZhou, "Hey, a man should be righteous. How can you harm me like that?" He thought it must be Yu LianZhou doing something sneaky, with his brothers probably. Otherwise, how can anyone have this much power? Yu LianZhou felt awkward, not knowing why he would make up something like that. Zong WeiXia stepped up and said, "Little kid. Who are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "My name is Zeng AhNuo." As he said this, he used his palm to shoot his chi into Yin TianZheng's body. Jiu Yang Zhen Chi is thick and pure, so Yin TianZheng was able to open his eyes after a few moments. He looked at this youngster, wondering who he is. Zhang Wuji simply smiled at him, and began to sent his chi even faster. After only a few moments, Yin TianZheng was able to stand up, and said, "Thank you, little friend!" Then he said, "Mr. Zong, your Qi Shang Fist is nothing, I'll take it right now!"

Zong WeiXia never thought Yin TianZheng could stand back

up again. Seeing that he's no longer at an advantage, plus afraid of his Eagle Claws, Zong WeiXia said, "If my Qi Shang Fist is indeed nothing, then let's match fists." He wanted to make Yin TianZheng stick to just fist, not claws. This way, he can win due to superior inner power. When Zhang Wuji heard him talk about Qi Shang Fist, he thought back to that night when his godfather told that story about killing Reverend Kong Jian, then later forced him to memorize the formula. When he couldn't memorize correctly, he even got scolded. But now, he has figured out the workings of this fist form. After all, no inner power in the world can match Jiu Yang Shen Gong. Plus, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi is made to point out how best to utilize one's power, combining all the intricacies of all the martial arts in the world. So knowing that means knowing all other martial arts. Which is why all the martial arts in the world are like open books to him. He then heard Yin TianZheng said, "Forget three fists, I can take thirty!" He then said to Kong Zhi, "Reverend Kong Zhi, I'm still alive. Are you going back on your promise?"

Kong Zhi waved his hand, said, "Everyone stop for a moment." Apparently, after Yin TianZheng found out what happened on the Brightness Peak, he had to trap Kong Zhi with words. Saying that they can't try to win by numbers. And proposed one-on-one match ups. But the remaining top level Ming fighters still could not handle their opponents. And in the end, only Yin TianZheng remained. Zhang Wuji realizes that although his grandfather is much better now, he still cannot utilize his inner chi. He's only matching palms with Zong WeiXia because he has to, in order to defend the sect. Therefore he said, "Elder Yin, I'll go take those fists for you. If I can't handle him, then you can go." Yin TianZheng realizes that this youngster's inner power is astonishing, much higher than himself even at full strength. But no matter how good he is, he still cannot fight every single person in the six major sects. So in the end, this youngster

will turn out just like himself, half dead. Although he is willing to die for the Ming sect, there's no reason for an outsider, especially someone so young and skillful, to do the same. He asked, "Which sect are you from, little friend? You're not a Ming sect member, are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "Although I am not a Ming sect member, nor a Heavenly Eagle sect member, I have always respected you. I am willing to help out." Yin TianZheng can't figure out what's going on, but just as he wants to ask more, Zong WeiXia said, "Here comes my first fist, old man."

Zhang Wuji said, "Elder Yin said you're not worthy of fighting him. You have to beat me first."

Zong WeiXia immediately became angry, said, "Who the hell do you think you are? Let me show you the power of my Qi Shang Fist." Zhang Wuji thought, "Only by bring up the plan of Yuan Zhen can we solve this misunderstanding. Otherwise, how can I possibly beat all these people? Besides, how can I possibly fight my martial uncles?" So he said, "I've long known the power of Kong Dong's Qi Shang Fist. After all, didn't Reverend Kong Jian die from your Qi Shang Fist?" This sentence startled the Shaolin sect. They knew that from looking at the body, Kong Jian did indeed die from the Qi Shang Fist. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and Kong Sheng discussed this for a long time, finally decided that no one in the Kong Dong sect has the power to kill someone who has learnt the 'Golden Invincible Body' skill. Later they found out that the Kong Dong elders were in the southeast area, while Kong Jian died in Luo Yang*. Other than the five Kong Dong elders, no one else can even come close to harming Kong Jian, so they let it go. Besides, there are the words 'Cheng Kun killed Kong Jian' nearby. So when they found out that it's Xie Xun who pretended to be Cheng Kun, it all became clear. Only now, when Zhang Wuji brought this up again, did they all become startled. Zong WeiXia said angrily, "Everyone knows that Xie

Xun is the killer. What does this have to do with us?” Zhang Wuji said, “Were you there to see this? Did you help him out?” Zong WeiXia thought, this little kid doesn’t look like a beggar, nor some farm kid, what’s he doing here? I bet it’s the Wu Dang people who sent him, trying to cause problems between Shaolin and us. I better be careful.” He said seriously, “Kong Jian died in Luo Yang. Us five elders were at Yun Nan* How can we have seen it?”

*Luo Yang was the capital of the Tang dynasty, and roughly in the central regions of China today. Yun Nan is a lot more to the south. Just felt like sharing some of the very miniscule knowledge I have of China’s history and geography.

Zhang Wuji said loudly, “That’s right! If you were at Yun Nan, then how do you know Xie Xun killed Kong Jian? Everyone knows that he died in the hands of the Qi Shang Fist. Xie Xun is not a member of the Kong Dong sect. How can you pin this crime on him?” Zhong WeiXia said, “Because the words ‘Cheng Kun killed Reverend Kong Jian’ appeared at the murder scene. Everyone knows that Xie Xun did all these crimes.”

Zhang Wuji thought, “My godfather never told me this. He felt only pain and regret for killing Kong Jian. How could he possibly write something like this?” He then laughed, said, “Everyone can write these words. I can say that you wrote those words. It’s easy to write words, but hard to learn Qi Shang Fist.” He then turned to Kong Zhi and said, “Reverend Kong Zhi, isn’t it true that Reverend Kong Jian was killed by Qi Shang Fist, and that Xie Xun was not a disciple of Kong Dong?”

Before he could respond, another monk came out, holding an iron staff in his hand. He yelled, “Little kid, which sect are you under? You think you’re worthy of talking to my teacher?

This just happens to be Yuan Yin. Back when Shaolin and the others went to Wu Dang to get Xie Xun's location, he's the one who said it was Zhang CuiShan who killed those Shaolin disciples. Zhang Wuji remembers this person, and his blood immediately began to boil. He kept thinking, "Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji. You're here to settle this misunderstanding, not to seek revenge. Otherwise, it can turn out really bad. You can settle this with Shaolin later." Although he knows what's the right decision, the tragic death of his parents keep appearing in his head. Sweat came down his face.

Yuan Yin then said, "If you aren't a Ming sect member, get out of here now. The Buddha is lenient. We won't stop you if you don't interfere." Zhang Wuji said, "Where's Reverend Yuan Zhen? Ask him to come out. I have some questions." Yuan Yin aid, "Brother Yuan Zhen? Why do you want him? Get out of the way. I don't have all day for rascals like you. Which sect are you under?" He saw the way Zhang Wuji pushed Zong WeiXia, knowing his teacher must be very good. Which is why he kept asking for his sect. Zhang Wuji said, "I'm not a Ming sect member. But I do know that someone purposely provoked the six major sects into fighting the Ming sect. I just want to settle this misunderstanding. Although I'm young, I do know the truth." After he said this, everyone in the six major sect began to laugh at him. With many people saying things like, "This kid's crazy. What's he blabbering about?" "Who does he think he is? Abbot of Sholin? Master Zhang of Wu Dang?" "Did he get the Dragon Saber in his dreams?" "Haha! Haha!" "He thinks we're all little kids. Oh man, my stomach hurts from the laughing!" Only Er Mei's Zhou ZhiRuo held her head low, not saying anything. Ever since she found out Zhang Wuji's identity, knowing he's the little boy she met on the boat, she has thought of him as an old friend. Later when he took her master's three palm strikes, saving those under the Golden Flag, she felt great admiration towards him. Now, seeing the crowd laughing, she

cannot but help feel bad and sympathetic.

Zhang Wuji did not back down, said, "Only when Yuan Zhen comes out can the truth be known." Even though he said this amidst all the laughter, everyone can still hear him clearly. Everyone in the six major sect immediately held back their laughter a bit, knowing that this youngster is not as simple as he seems, thinking, "How can someone so young have such amazing inner power?" When the laughter died down, Yuan Yin said, "You little punk, you knew Yuan Zhen brother is dead, yet you still asks for him? Why don't you ask for Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan to come out too?"

Just as he said this, Kong Zhi immediately yelled, "Yuan Yin, be careful when you speak!" But Hua Shan, Kong Dong, and Kun Lun people have already started laughing again. Only Wu Dang remained still. Apparently, Yuan Yin, after Yin SuSu hit his eyes with her darts, still thinks Zhang CuiShan did it. And therefore felt deep hatred for him.

Zhang Wuji could not hold back his anger after hearing him ridicule father, yelled, "How dare you speak to Fifth Hero Zhang like that?" Yuan Yin laughed coldly, "He's just a lecherous fool, getting hooked by the beauty of an evil woman..." Zhang Wuji knows that he cannot harm anyone in order to stop this bloodshed, but how can he possibly hold back after that comment? He dashed forward, his left hand reached out and held up Yuan Yin at the back of his waist, his right hand reached out and took his staff. Yuan Yin could not fight back. But just at this time, two Shaolin disciples came out, their staffs aiming towards the left and right side of Zhang Wuji. Their moves aimed towards saving someone in the grasp of an enemy. These two disciples are Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye. Zhang Wuji held Yuan Yin in one hand, his staff with the right, jumped up, and kicked at the point of Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye's staffs. Only to hear two sounds, as Yuan Xin and

Yuan Ye both fell to the ground, their staffs bouncing back and hit them. Thankfully both of their inner powers are quite good, so they did not suffer internal injuries. Zhang Wuji twisted in midair, then gently floated down. Many people in the six sects immediately yelled, "Wu Dang's 'Cloud Stairs'!" Zhang Wuji learned Wu Dang's entrance fist form 'Wu Dang Long Fist' from his dad, martial grandfather, and fellow martial uncles. Although he had since seen many other skills, he's still most familiar with Wu Dang's kung fu. For the likes of Yu LianZhou and Zhong SongXi, it's not difficult to use 'Cloud Stairs' as well as Zhang Wuji. But for them to do so while holding another person is simply impossible.

By now, he's quite far from the Shaolin group. So the only way to reach him is through darts. But Zhang Wuji only needs to use Yuan Yin as a shield to borrow Shaolin's hand for killing him. Even with the likes of such experts as Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, no one has any way to save him. Only to see Zhang Wuji's face filled with hatred as he raised the staff. Yet didn't bring it down. It's as if he has a hard decision to make. But then after a while, his expression calmed, and lowered the staff slowly. He thought, "If I kill just one person here, I will become the enemy of the six major sect, and can no longer be an arbitrator. This bloodshed will then continue. That's why I must endure, endure no matter what. This is what my parents would've wanted me to do." Once he thought this through, he put down Yuan Yin, said, "Reverend Yuan Yin, your eyes were not blinded by Fifth Hero Zhang, why do you hate him so? Besides, he had already committed suicide, so any grudge should've been settled at that point.

After his escape from death, Yuan Yin could only stare blankly at Zhang Wuji, unable to speak. When Zhang Wuji threw him his staff, he took it and returned to his group, thinking he really did go overboard with his hatred the past years. When the high reverends of Shaolin and the heroes of Wu Dang

heard this, they all nodded silently.

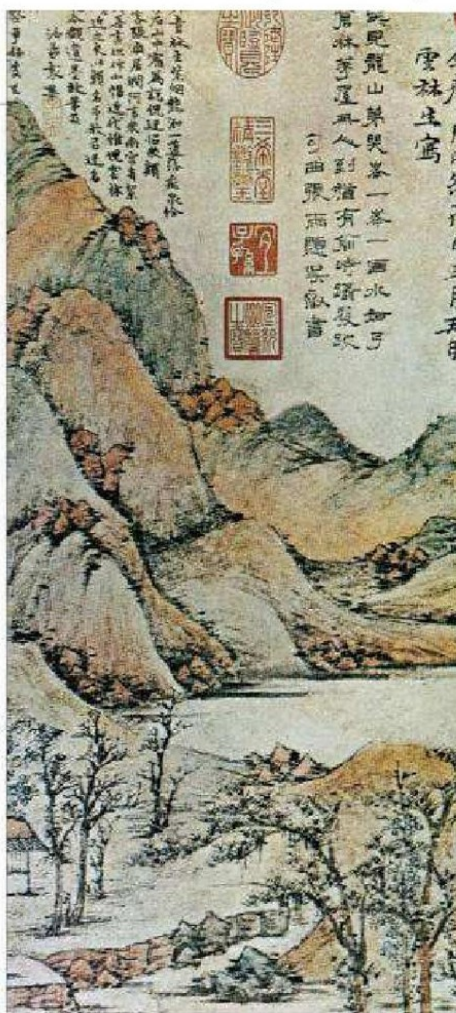
End of Chapter 20.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Chapter 21 - Solving Problems, Resolving Disputes and Combating the 6 Forces

(Translated by Faerie Queen and Meh)



By the time Zhang Wuji finished his last sentence "That won't be necessary", his body flew up and then began to spin, spinning four times quickly in midair, each time higher than the last, until he made a final flip, before landing soft as a feather down to the ground far away. The watchers could only stare in awe as they watched. If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, no one would have believed that someone could possess such amazing lightness kung fu. Even the Green Bat King, who thought his own lightness kung fu was unparalleled, could only sigh in reverence.

Zong Wei Xia became secretly alarmed as he witnessed Zhang Wu Ji capture the heavy weighing Yuan Yin with such ease. But he was already situated in the middle of the battlefield, how could he possibly retreat now and thus reveal his weakness? Therefore, Zong Wei Xia shouts out loudly, "Hey! The one called Zeng! You came in here and insisted on sticking your nose into our business. Who sent you here, and whose orders are you acting on?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "I act merely with the hope of seeing the 6 great sects being able to resolve their conflicts and make peace with the Ming sect. I am not ordered by anyone." Zong Wei Xia barks back, "Hmph! You expect us to shake hands and make peace with the demon sect?! It's absurd and impossible. The old bandit Yan promised to receive 3 more stances of my Fists of the Seven Damages, let me finish him first before I take care of you!" he rolls up his sleeves and prepares to fight.

Zhang Wu Ji immediately interrupts, "Elder Zong, you keep mentioning the Fists of the Seven Damages, but allow me to express my humble opinion elder – your current skill level of the Fists of the Seven Damages has still not been executed to an expertly stage yet. There are 5 elements within the human body – heart as governed by fire, lungs governed by gold, kidney by water, spleen by earth and liver by wood, in

addition to that, there are the two chi(s) – Ying and Yang. Once one practices the Fists of the Seven Damages, all 7 elements will be inflicted with damage. The foundation of this set of fists was inclined to be in such a way that with every level you advance in, your own internal organs will also have to subsequently withstand an extra level of damage. Hence you have to first inflict harm upon your own self before you can harm your enemy. However, elder Zong, the good news is that you have not been practicing this set of fists for very long, therefore you can still be saved.”

Listening to these words, Zong Wei Xia recognized that they were indeed the key points delineated within the manual’s central instructions for the Fists of the Seven Damages. The manual did repeatedly describe of these side-effects, warning the practitioner that if they were to attempt this set of fist, it must not be done so unless the reserve of their energy levels has reached the point of where it can course through the various acupoints of their body at will and be withdrawn with ease. If one has not reached this level yet, then they must caution to never practice this set of fists. However, this set of fists was the most famous and powerful martial art in the Kong Dong sect, therefore as soon as Zong Wei Xia reached a fairly stable reserve of internal energy he immediately started to practice this set of fists. He suddenly found the power within his punches to have increased significantly and once his appetite was wetted, it became very hard for him to restrain from continuing the practice. Hence all traces of the manual’s warning has long since been completely forgotten. Besides, all of the 5 elders in the Kong Dong sect practices this set of fists and since Zong Wei Xia himself resided in the second position, how could he possibly allow himself to be outdone? But upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji’s words at this moment, he became suddenly alarmed. Shocked, he asked, “How did you know all this?”

Zhang Wu Ji does not reply, but continues to say, “Elder Zong, I entreat you to massage the yun-men, cloud-gate energy point on your shoulder – are you feeling a faint throbbing pain? The yun-men energy point governs the lungs, which means that the connection to your lungs has been wounded. The qing-ling, jade-spirit energy point located on the upper half of your kidney will often give you a numbing ache that becomes unbearable – am I right? The qing-ling energy point is related to the heart, meaning the heart pulse has been damaged. The wu-li, five-mile energy point on your thigh will ache with pain every time the weather rains or clouds over. This is due to the fact that the wu-li point governs the liver, meaning your liver has suffered harm. The longer you continue this practice, the more increasingly severe these faint signs of bodily disorder will become. If you continue on for another 8 or 9 years, I’m afraid that you will cripple your whole body for life.”

As Zong Wei Xia concentrated on Zhang Wu Ji’s every word, bead after bead of sweat emanated from his forehead. Little did he know that many years ago, Xie Xun had related the whole essence and nature of the Fists of the Seven Damages to Zhang Wu Ji, thus enabling Zhang to be very well acquainted with the nature of this martial art skill. On top of that, Zhang is extremely well learned in the practice of medicine, thoroughly understanding the relationship between the various pulse points and the side effects that arises from their damage. Thus every word that he utters is dead on. Over the course of these few years, Zong Wei Xia has indeed been feeling faint traces of those side effects that Zhang Wu Ji mentioned. Due to the fact that his condition has not yet reached the state of which would give cause for any serious alarm, he has therefore always secretly harboured his illnesses and remained averse to the idea of seeking medication. But hearing Zhang Wu Ji list out one after the other, details of his physical condition so accurately,

he couldn't help but be alarmed to the point of undergoing a change of colour in his countenance. It is only after the duration of a very long pause before he is finally able to utter the words, "How ... how did you know this?"

Zhang Wu Ji smiles faintly and replies, "I happen to know a little about the laws of medicine. If elder you are willing to trust me, as soon as the situation here is resolved, I can think of ways to cure you of your present ailments. But I must remind you once more that practicing this skill will only bring upon harm, and will do you absolutely no good. You must not continue to practice it."

Zong Wei Xia forces himself to refute, "The Fists of the Seven Damages is the top martial art skill within the Kong Dong sect's establishment, how can it be as you say, harmful and unbeneficial? Back in the days, our sect's ancestor Mu Ling Zi established worldwide fame for himself solely from this set of fists. Not only did his great name spread to the four seas, but he also lived to be 91 years old! How can it be damaging to the body? Doesn't this prove that your words are a pile of rubbish?"

Zhang Wu Ji replies, "It can be imagined that the elder Mu Ling Zi must have achieved an extremely powerful reserve of inner energy, therefore he, of course can practice this skill. Not only will it do him no harm, it will actually work to strengthen his internal organic system. According to my humble opinion elder Zong, your level of inner energy has still not reached this level yet. If you continue to forcefully practice this skill, I'm afraid that in the end all will be to no avail, and your efforts will only result in uselessness."

Zong Wei Xia was a famous and important figure within the Kong Dong sect, therefore even though he recognizes that Zhang Wu Ji's words were not without its truthfulness, yet

having the most famous set of fist skill that helped to establish the name of his sect being criticized by this youngster in front of a big crowd of martial art fighters as being “useless,” how can he possibly not be angry? He shouts out loudly, “Who do you think you are? How dare you criticize my sect’s greatest martial arts skill? If you think that it is really to be looked upon so lightly, then why don’t you come out and try it yourself, see whether it really is so useless?” Zhang Wu Ji smiles ever so faintly and replies, “The Fists of the Seven Damages is most definitely a superbly complex and mystical skill. The essence of the fists lies in its embodiment of raw force that still maintains a degree of gentleness, a simultaneous energy of harmonious balance that still exerts forceful power. The seven different channels of execution are each distinct, it ebbs and flows with hundreds of variations. It really catches one’s opponent off guard and renders them defenceless.” Zong Wei Xia upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji relate with straightforward honesty the intricate relationships of the Fists of the Seven Damages, he could no longer help himself from breaking into faint signs of a smile while repeatedly nodding his head in agreement. Zhang Wu Ji continues, “I am just saying that if one’s inner energy reserve has not reached an adequate level, then practicing the fist skill will definitely cause more harm than good.”

Zhou Zhi Rou was standing behind a bunch of her shi jies as she observed Zhang Wu Ji. She mused at the fact that though Zhang embodied the faint traces of a young person’s charismatic spirit, he was at the same time forcing himself to appear as this worldly, well-learned old soul as he lectured solemnly and soberly. It was as if he was teaching a lesson to Zong Wei Xia, the second elder of the Kong Dong sect’s 5 elders – she couldn’t help but be amused by the ridiculous and comical nature of the whole situation. Yet at the same time, she couldn’t help but start to secretly worry for him.

Hearing the content of Zhang Wu Ji's words gradually becoming more and more offensive, the reckless and impulsive young disciples of the Kong Dong sect were almost unable to restrain themselves from shouting out insults. But when they looked over at Zong Wei Xia, they saw that he was harbouring a serious countenance as he devotes the utmost attention and concentration to this youngster's words. The young disciples can therefore only force back the insults that had already arrived at the tip of their tongues.

Zong Wei Xia asks, "So from what you are saying, my inner energy levels is still not advanced enough?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "Whether elder's inner energy levels has progressed to an advance state yet, I dare not make any judgements rashly. But if during all this time that you have spent practicing the Fists of the Seven Damages, you are also simultaneously hurting your own body, then it is better to not practice ..."

Before he could continue, he suddenly heard an angry shout from behind him, "Brother, why waste your breath on this young rascal? If he dares to look down upon our sect's Fists of the Seven Damages, then let him withstand the taste of one of my fists!" With the termination of this person's voice, followed his fist. His movements were both fast and deadly, a force whooshed by to deliver a heavy fist that landed upon the ling tai, spirit-temple energy point of Zhang Wu Ji's back.

Although Zhang Wu Ji was very aware of the impending attack coming up from behind him, yet not only did he chose to completely ignore it, but he also continued to address Zong Wei Xia, "Elder Zong..."

Suddenly sounds of metal chains clanging against each other were heard, and a person rushed out from the crowd. A sweet

melodious voice cries out, "You're secretly attacking him behind his back?!" upon saying this, a set of hands joined by metal cuffs reaches out over the attacker's head. The voice belonged to Xiao Zhao. That person struck back with his left hands, thereby blocking off the metal chains and then very concretely landed a punch on Zhang Wu Ji's back. Although this punch landed dead on upon Zhang Wu Ji's ling tai acupoint, yet not only did Zhang Wu Ji seem to have not even registered the blow, but instead he turns toward Xiao Zhao and smiles gently, "Don't worry Xiao Zhao, this level of the Fists of the Seven Damages will not be of much use." Xiao Zhao breathes a sigh of relief, her snow white skin suddenly tinged with a red blush, as she says in a low voice, "I almost forgot that you have already practiced ..." upon saying this, immediately hushed up and backed away, returning to the crowds, dragging her metal chains along with her.

Zhang Wu Ji turns around and discovered that the attacker was an old man with a big head and skinny body. This man was the fourth elder of the Kong Dong sect's 5 elders - his name was Chang Jing Zhi. Although that one punch had clearly landed directly on Zhang Wu Ji's crucial pulse point, yet Zhang did not seem to have felt anything at all. Chang Jing Zhi was flabbergasted, as he blurted out the words, "You ... you've already mastered the 'Divine Art of Diamond Body Invulnerability,' then you are from the Shaolin sect?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "I am not a Shaolin disciple ..." Chang Jing Zhi knew that all those who practiced this mystical skill of bodily-protection must depend upon the generation of a single breath of inner Qi. Once that person opens their mouth to speak, that breath of Qi will dissipate immediately. Therefore before Zhang Wu Ji can finish his sentence, Chang struck out once again, this time landing a fist upon Zhang Wu Ji's chest.

Zhang Wu Ji smiles and says, "I've already said that the Fists

of the Seven Damages is useless if one has not achieved an advanced level of inner energy, if you don't believe me, then please feel free to throw another punch at me." Chang Jing Zhi did not waste a single moment before striking out with the speed of the wind, throwing out one punch after another, as two consecutive punches landed on Zhang Wu Ji. In total, altogether of four punches were thrown, every one of them having most definitely landed on Zhang Wu Ji's body. Yet Zhang continues to smile easily as he receives them, as if he was oblivious to the pain. The four stances of heavy hand all embodied an obliterating force capable of smashing rocks and shattering tombs, yet they were all sustained by Zhang Wu Ji as if they were nothing more than the soft touch of a light breeze and the gentle caress of smooth silk.

Chang Jing Zhi has always been known as the "mountain-splitting single fist," and although the grandeur of this title may have been slightly exaggerated, yet the forcefulness of his punches cannot be denied. Among the older generation of martial art fighters, he has always remained a respected and well-known figure. There was not a single person on that scene who was not left in a state of utter astonishment and disbelief having witnessed with their own eyes how the four consecutive punches that Chang Jing Zhi executed all amounting to nothing more than a waste of energy. The Kun Lun sect and Kong Dong Sect have always been rivals, and although at this moment they were both cooperating with each other in their attempts to combat the Ming sect, yet in the hearts of both sides lies deep discontentment and contempt for the other sect. A voice coming from the Kun Lun sect mocks in an icy tone, "Oh, very good! A great 'mountain-splitting single fist' indeed!" Another person scoffs "And exactly what has those 4 punches been able to split?" It was a good thing that Chang Jing Zhi had such a dark complexion, for although his face has already flushed a deep red it was luckily not too noticeable under his dark skin.

Zong Wei Xia formed a fist with his two hands in accordance to the social etiquette of respectful courtesy, “Young hero Zeng, I am much impressed and amazed at your divine martial art skills. Can this old man ask you to engage in an exchange of 3 stances?” He knew that his Fists of the Seven Damages was at a much more advanced level compared to Chang Jing Zhi’s, therefore he figured that just because his brother fails, he himself may not necessarily lose to the opponent.

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “The Kong Dong sect’s Fists of the Seven Damages is without a doubt a superb skill IF it is practiced correctly, as it is most definitely a force that is capable of obliterating anything in its path. Even the great Shaolin monk Kong Jian who had been able to master the supreme skill of “Divine Art of Diamond Body Invulnerability” died under the Fists of the Seven Damages belonging to your sect. My martial art abilities can in no way be said to even come close to matching that of the great revered monk Kong Jian, how can I possibly be of match? But if elder you insist, I figure there is no harm in receiving 3 of your punches.” The meaning behind his words were clearly implying that though the Fists of the Seven Damages was originally powerful, yet based on the level you have achieved now, you are nowhere near the vicinity of causing any harm.

Zong Wei Xia had no time to care about what the hidden meanings behind Zhang Wu Ji’s words may have been, as he was already secretly generating a few consecutive breathes of inner Qi. Zong Wei Xia came forward a step, noises from the bones of his arm that were rattling against each other started to emanate from the force building up within him. A punch was thrown, and with force it impacted with Zhang Wu Ji’s chest. However, as Zong Wei Xia’s fist made contact with Zhang Wu Ji’s body, Zong Wei Xia immediately discovered

that there seemed to be a mysterious magnetic force surrounding Zhang's body that is momentarily locking Zong's arm in a fixed position. Much to his alarm, Zong Wei Xia felt that there was suddenly this very soft and warm energy that was entering him through the fist and was heading straight for his dan tien, the elixir field. In that region between his chest and stomach suddenly appeared an indescribable, yet extremely comfortable and harmonious feeling. Shocked from this mysterious phenomenon, Zong Wei Xia retracts his arm and again releases yet another punch in Zhang's direction, this time striking his lower stomach. Yet the reverberating power that resonates back towards him was extremely strong and forceful, he had to back up a step before he was able to find his balance. He again generated internally a few cycles of energy before once again stepping forward and extended his fist in a fierce punch.

At that moment, Chang Jing Zhi was situated right by Zhang Wu Ji. From Chang Jing Zhi's perspective, Zong Wei Xia seemed to him to have sustained internal injuries as his countenance was fluctuating between flashes of deep red to moments of deathly paleness. Therefore as Zong Wei Xia threw his third punch, Chang Jing Zhi was already prepared to follow Zong with his own fist. Zong Wei Xia struck Zhang Wu Ji on the chest, while Chang Jing Zhi simultaneously attacked Zhang from the back. The two fists impacted on separate parts of Zhang Wu Ji's body at the same time, and there can be no doubt that the force impacted upon his body was ferocious. Yet who could have expected those two extremely strong sources of energy to be mysteriously and completely dissipated within a brief instant? Chang and Zong's combined efforts seemed to have resulted to nothing more than a mere punch into empty space.

Chang Jing Zhi knew very well that he was acting from the

position of an elder, and the first time he snuck up and attacked Zhang Wu Ji from behind so as to catch him unawares was already an extremely frowned upon jiang hu taboo. However, at that time he can at least adamantly claim that Zhang Wu Ji's disrespectful words were tarnishing the reputation of Kong Dong sect's greatest skill, and thus blame his own actions on the momentary inability to control his temper. Yet this second time around, his sneak assault was undoubtedly the despicable act of a malicious scoundrel. He originally thought that by the combined forces generated from his brother and his own Fists of the Seven Damages, this youngster will definitely succumb to defeat under their fists. Chang knew that as long as he is able to kill the youngster, even if there surfaces any kind of gossip or talk from others afterwards, the fact remains that he has nevertheless eliminated a useless nobody for the 6 great sects and therefore could still be said to have established a heroic accomplishment. Yet strangely, as soon as his fist landed upon his opponent's body, the entirety of his forceful strength immediately dissipated into nothingness. Chang Jing Zhi was extremely puzzled, he racked his brains yet was still unable to come up with a single clue of how all this could have happened. He could only raise his left hand to his own head, scratching it in state of contemplation.

Zhang Wu Ji addresses Zong Wei Xia with a slight smile, "How are you feeling Elder?"

Zong Wei Xia bows to Zhang Wu Ji in an act of humble reverence, and with respectful esteem to Zhang Wu Ji he says, "Thank you hero Zeng for using your inner energies to heal my bodily afflictions. Young hero Zeng, it is obviously undeniable that your divine marital arts' proficiency is of an unfathomably deep level. Yet it is this act of repaying the injustice done upon you with an act of kindness and goodwill, this display of such greatness in character and

morality that causes me to be truly humbled by and gratuitous towards.”

As soon as these words were said, there was not a single person on the battlefield that was not completely astonished and baffled. Of course nobody was aware of the fact that when Zong Wei Xia attacked Zhang Wu Ji consecutively with three punches, Zhang Wu Ji used that opportunity to generate his 9 Yang Zhen Jing, thus delivering his energy into Zong Wei Xia’s body. Although the duration was brief, sweeping over Zong’s body in a short moment’s timeframe, yet the 9 Yang Zhen Jing’s energy was extremely substantial and solidly profound, and even from that brief experience Zong Wei Xia has already benefited quite a bit. He knew that had it not been for Chang Jing Zhi’s surreptitious attack on Zhang Wu Ji, the benefits that could be have been reaped by the third punch would have been much greater.

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “ ‘greatness in character and morality,’ these are kind words of which I am not worthy of. Elder Zong at this moment, your essential nerves and the eight veins have already experienced great agitation, the best thing for you to do right now would be to immediately bring your energies back into balance. It is only through this process can all the harmful toxins that have accumulated within your body from all these years of practicing the Fists of the Seven damages be gradually eradicated within two or three years.”

Zong Wei Xia finally recognized now that his body has indeed fallen ill, so he promptly formed his hands into a fist gesturing gratitude and said earnestly “Thank you, thank you!” and without wasting a moment’s time, he immediately moved back a step and sat down on the floor in order to start generating his Qi. Although Zong Wei Xia knew very well that this gesture was somewhat unsightly and causing him to lose all dignity of appearance, yet this was a life and death

situation and therefore he couldn't allow himself to be bothered or hindered by anything else right now.

Zhang Wu Ji bent down and started to reconnect Tang Wen Liang's broken ribs. He turned towards Chang Jing Zhi and commanded, "bring some Yang-Rejuvenating Five Dragons Paste to me." Chang Jing Zhi obediently took out the said paste and handed it over to Zhang Wu Ji. Zhang Wu Ji then requested, "will you please ask the Wu Tang sect to borrow a dosage of their Triple-Huang Wax tablets, and ask to borrow a bit of Hua Shan sect's Yu Zhen Powder" Chang Jing Zhi obediently followed Zhang Wu Ji's every word, gathering the necessary items and bringing them to Zhang Wu Ji. Zhang Wu Ji explains, "your sect's Yang-Rejuvenating Five-Dragons paste is composed of the Cao Wu (aconite) which is extremely effective, while the Wu Tang sect's Triple-Huang Wax tablets' ingredients of the three different kinds of Huang – Ma Huang (ephedra herba), Xiong Huang (realgar) and Teng Huang (Resina Garciniae), is also very beneficial. Add to this the Yu Zhen Powder, and as long as elder Tang gets plenty of rest in his recuperation, 2 months later his limbs will be functioning as well as before," as he was explaining this, Zhang Wu Ji was all the while applying the medicine to Tang Wen Liang's broken bones, finishing the treatment within a moment's time.

The various sects each had their own unique formula of therapeutic medicine, each one unique in their remedial nature and the outcome they affect. The details of the various sects' medicinal remedies were all clearly and explicitly recorded within Hu Qing Niu's medicine chronicles. Zhang Wu Ji figured that since the 6 major sects were flanking the Ming sect on Guang Ming Peak, they must have each brought along their own remedial medicine in preparation for battle. But the onlookers just became all the more puzzled, not only because Zhang Wu Ji's curative

abilities far excels that of any eminent and famed doctor, but they were even more flabbergasted by the fact that Zhang Wu Ji was able to accurately assess the therapeutic properties of the various medicines belong to each sect. Chang Jing Zhi approached Tang Wen Liang and helped him to his feet, before retreating with a distinct expression of embarrassment and shame. Tang Wen Liang suddenly shouted, "You! Zeng! Tang Wen Liang is extremely indebted to you for healing my injuries. You have my word - one day I will repay your charitable act. But the demon sect is our sect's sworn adversary. The Kong Dong sect will forever be enemies with the Ming sect, the various scores of vengeance and retribution is something that has long existed between us and is not something that can be resolved through a small favour done on me by you. You're trying to persuade us to settle our arguments, but we will not be persuaded. If you feel that I am being an ungrateful bastard who does not appreciate the good deed you have done for me, you can just break all my limbs again, but you can't persuade us to settle our scores with the demon sect."

Once these words were uttered, the same thought was running through everyone's mind, "Although they both belong to the Kong Dong sect, yet this Tang Wen Liang definitely has more integrity than that Chang Jing Zhi."

Zhang Wu Ji replied, "If Elder Tang indeed feels this way, then may I ask what I can do in order for you to listen to my words?"

Tang Wen Liang replies, "Show us your martial art skills. If Kong Dong sect's skill is indeed inferior to yours, then I have nothing to say."

Zhang Wu Ji replies, "The number of skilled fighters within the Kong Dong sect are as vast as the clouds, how can I

possibly compete with them? Forgive me for being bold and reckless, but today I am insisting on playing the role of the peacemaker so I'll give it a try. I can only give it my all, using my life as a gamble." He looks around him and sees that on the east end of the battlefield is an enormous pine tree that must have been taller than 30 feet. Its roots spanning out in all directions as it stands solidly rooted in the ground. Zhang Wu Ji walks over to the tree and speaks out in a loud and clear voice, "Once I happened to come upon the opportunity of learning a little bit of your sect's Fists of the Seven Damages. If I do anything incorrectly, I entreat you to please be tolerant of me." Everyone became very shocked upon hearing this, all in a state of disbelief and questioning, "How can it be that this young man will also know even the Kong Dong sect's Fists of the Seven Damages? From where could he have possibly learned this skill?" Zhang Wu Ji continues in a clear and steady voice, "The five central channels of energy balances Ying and Yang. Harm the heart, wound the lungs, and mutilate the liver and intestines. Viscera is shattered, energy recedes, will wanes. Once all three sectors of the stomach are reversed, along with the breath, the spirit flees away."

Although members belonging to the other sects did not take much interest in Zhang Wu Ji's words, however, the 5 elders of the Kong Dong sect were all shaken to the core upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji clearly and accurately recite these 4 stanzas of words that resembled neither poem nor song. What was just recited by Zhang Wu Ji was indeed the general indexical stanza for the Fists of the Seven Damages, and its composition has always remained a secret belonging to the Kong Dong sect that was not related to outsiders - how could it be that this youngster also knows how to recite it? At that moment how could they have possibly guessed that many years ago when Xie Xun stole the book containing the steps to the Fists of the Seven Damages, he had also related its

contents to Zhang Wu Ji?

Zhang Wu Ji while reciting in a clear voice walks forward and strikes out with a punch. The sound of a loud “boom” echoes out and a blur of jade green flashes by the eyes as the top half of the great pine tree is severed off, flying to a side and landing on the ground almost twenty feet away from its original spot. All that is left on the ground is the bottom half of the trunk that is now only around 4 feet tall, the area of disconnection was even and levelled out.

Chang Jing Zhi mumbles to himself, “that’s ... that’s not the Fists of the Seven Damages!” The theory behind the Fists of the Seven Damages requires the method of execution to embody both hard and soft elements – where within waves of solid force will also simultaneously exist traces of gentleness, as well as vice versa where soothing suppleness bears the presence of dynamic power. Although this act of severing a big tree into two parts was indeed an extremely powerful move that would call for amazement, yet the source of power derived to execute it is of an extremely solid and forceful kind of energy. Chang Jing Zhi approached the dislocated piece for a closer inspection and could he not stop his jaw from dropping into a gaping hole of disbelief. Jolted into a state of shock and astonishment, he was unable to close his mouth. Chang saw that the core of the tree was cleanly and completely severed, clearly indicating the work of one whose practice of the Fists of the Seven Damages has already reached the highest level.

In actuality, Zhang Wu Ji was intent upon using his power and ability to take control over the battle scene. Therefore, if he was to use the Fists of the Seven Damages to sever the core of the tree trunk, he must wait from 10 days to half a month for the core of the pine tree to dry and shrivel up before he could finish it off. Hence, as he delivered a blow

using the Fists of the Seven Damages, he also proceeded with an extremely strong and forceful Yang energy in order to break the tree into a clean half. Years ago on the ice-fire island, his yi fu Xie Xun also employed a similar method based on the same principle of first using the Fists of the Seven Damages to crack and shatter the internal core of the tree before immediately using the dragon sabre to cleanly slice through it.

All that was heard around him were the cheers, excitement and praises coming from all the sects. The energetic enthusiasm was gushing towards Zhang Wu Ji like tidal waves, lasting quite a while before finally quieting down.

Chang Jing Zhi exclaims "Outstanding! That was indeed a demonstration of the highest achievement of the Fists of the Seven Damages skill! I truly bow to you! But I have to ask you young hero Zeng, from where did you learn this set of fists?" Zhang Wu Ji smiles faintly and does not reply. Tang Wen Liang asks in a sharp tone, "Where is the Golden Mane Lion King right now? I entreat young hero Zeng to impart upon us his whereabouts." Tang has always been a perceptive and shrewd person, and has therefore vaguely deduced that Xie Xun must somehow be either related to, or associated with the youngster that is currently standing in front of him.

Zhang Wu Ji becomes alarmed and thinks to himself, "Darn it! Using the Fists of the Seven Damages has brought attention upon yi fu's presence. If I truthfully relate to them my relationship with yi fu it will only make me the enemy of the 6 great sects, and then my attempts at playing the role of the peacemaker will not succeed." He then proceeds to say, "Your sect is insisting that the ultimate figure responsible for the abduction of the manual for the Fists of the Seven Damages is the Golden Mane Lion King? That is wrong, very

wrong! That night on the Kong Dong Mountain in the midst of the fight within Qing Yang temple, there was one person in your sect who was injured by the Divine Art of Originating Formation, and hence red spots started to appear all over his whole body. The attacker that night was the one who is known to all as the 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' – Cheng Kun.”

Years ago, when Xie Xun arrived on the Kong Dong mountain intent on stealing the fist manual, Cheng Kun purposely assisted him without his awareness in order that he may generate more enemies for the Ming sect. That night, Cheng Kun used the Divine Art of Originating Formation to injure the two elders Tang Wen Liang and Chang Jing Zhi. Xie Xun was not aware that Cheng Kun had secretly assisted him that night, and it was only later when Xie Xun encountered the monk Kong Jian who elucidated for him the truth, did he finally understand what happened. Zhang Wu Ji was thinking to himself that since Cheng Kun has spent a whole lifetime engaged in implementing nothing but evil deeds, purposely framing others for his own evil feats, he may as well give him his just desserts by retaliating in the style of Cheng Kun. Zhang Wu Ji felt that not only was he not lying, but he was also uncovering the truth.

Tang Wen Liang and Chang Jing Zhi had harboured suspicions in their hearts for more than 20 years. At this moment, being presented with an explanation from Zhang Wu Ji, the various incoherencies suddenly fell into place. Tang and Chang looked at each other for a moment, unable to say anything for a while. Zong Wei Xia inquires, “May I ask you hero Zeng, this Cheng Kun – where has he escaped to at this present moment?”

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “The Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun was fuelled by only one purpose, and

that was to create disorder between the 6 great sects and the Ming sect. He was later taken in under Shaolin's wing, and changed his name to Yuan Zhen. Last night, he sneaked into the Ming sect's inner forum and admitted to these crimes with his own mouth to the Ming sect's head leaders. At that time, Mr. Yang Xiao, Wei Bat-King, and the 5 wanderers were all listening. I swear that this is the unembellished truth. If there is a single false word, then I am even lower than a crowd of dogs and pigs, and when I die may it be that I will be tortured by millions of diabolical calamities and doomed to suffer in eternity, never be reborn again."

Having heard Zhang Wu Ji deliver these words with utmost sincerity and earnestness, the majority of people were struck with wonder and speculation. Only the Shaolin sect's various monks simultaneously erupted into loud shouts of protest.

(Continued by Meh)

Only to hear a person stepping up from the crowd, chanting Buddhist prayers. He wears a gray robe, his expression stern, and his left hand holds a string of beads. This is one of the three Mystical Reverends of Shaolin, Kong Sheng. He spoke as he entered the arena, "Mr. Zeng, why do you say such lies, ridiculing my Shaolin Temple? How can I possibly let you continue to say such profane words in front these heroes?" Zhang Wuji bowed and said, "Do not be angry, reverend. Please allow Yuan Zhen monk to step up, so the truth can be told." Reverend Kong Sheng said with a glum face, "Mr. Zeng keeps asking for my martial nephew Yuan Zhen. You are still quite a young man. Why do you have such a venomous heart?" Zhang Wuji said, "I simply would like for Monk Yuan Zhen to come out, so all the truths and lies will be sorted out. Why would this be venomous?" Kong Sheng said, "Martial nephew Yuan Zhen is my martial brother Kong Jian's last student. His devotion to the Buddha is very strong. Other

than coming with us to the Ming sect, he has never left the temple even once. How can he be the The Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun? Besides, martial nephew Yuan Zhen, in order to help us demolish the Devil sect, has already died. How can you say such things about him even in death?"

The words 'already died' resonate heavily into Zhang Wuji's ears. His face instantly turns white. Whatever else Kong Sheng might have later said, he did not hear. Zhang Wuji can only stutter, "He... he really died? No... no it can't be." Kong Sheng then points to a pile of monk bodies on the side, and yells loudly, "You can go see for yourself!" Zhang Wuji walks in front of the dead bodies, only to indeed find the body of Yuan Zhen. He checks for breathing, then the muscles for warmth. Based on the temperature, he has already been dead for quite a while. Zhang Wuji felt sadness and happiness in his own heart. He never thought that his godfather's mortal enemy now lies here dead. The blood in his chest boiled, as he could not hold back facing the sky and laugh, "Oh, you scoundrel. You have done so much evil in your life. Ha! Looks like even you have today's outcome today."

These thunderous laughs shook the mountain, trembling the minds of everyone there. Zhang Wuji turns around and asks, "Who killed Yuan Zhen?" Kong Sheng's face looks cold as ice, and does not respond. Yin TianZheng had already retreated to the side, but now he speaks up, "He and my son Yin YeWang matched palms. One person died and one person injured as a result." Zhang Wuji bows and says, "I see." He thought, "I bet after taking Wei YiXiao's Soft Ice Palm, Yuan Zhen became seriously injured. My uncle's power is also quite incredible. So that is how he died. I am really glad that it was my uncle who helped me achieve this revenge." He walks to Yin YeWang's side, checks his condition, and realizes

that the injuries are not life threatening. He said, "Thank you, elder!"

Kong Sheng became angrier and angrier as he watched on the side, exclaiming, "Little kid, get ready to die!" These words resonated loudly into the ears of everyone there. Zhang Wuji turns around and asks, "Why?" Kong Sheng said loudly, "You knew that martial nephew Yuan Zhen is dead. Yet you put all the blame on his shoulders. How can I let someone so malicious live? I will break the pillar not to kill today. Are you going to commit suicide, or do you want me to kill you?" Zhang Wuji thought, "The fact that the main culprit Yuan Zhen had died is originally a good thing. But now how can I show them the truth now?" Just as he is still thinking of a plan, Kong Sheng steps up and aims his right hand at Zhang Wuji's head. His hand is straight as a stick from the wrist to the fingers, sharp and crisp. Yin TianZheng yelled, "Be careful, it's Dragon Claws!"

Zhang Wuji's turns to the side, gently sidestepping the attack. When Kong Sheng could not grab him the first time, he tried again. This time, he's even quicker and more ferocious. Zhang Wuji again sidesteps his grab by evading to the left. Kong Sheng's third, fourth, and the fifth strikes immediately followed. In an instant, a gray-robed man became a gray dragon. The dragon shadow flies in the air, the dragon claws dances rapidly, pushing Zhang Wuji to the point where he can no longer move away. A quick 'swoosh' sound later, Zhang Wuji's body flew up, but Kong Sheng had already grabbed his right sleeves, pulling down. Five cuts appeared on Zhang Wuji's shoulder as blood pour out. The Shaolin monks immediately cheered on, but a lone girl screamed in shock. Zhang Wuji looked at the direction of the voice, only to see Xiao Zhao's expression extremely pale. She said, "Young master Zhang, you... you be careful." Zhang Wuji's heart felt a tingle of warmth, and thought, "This little

girl is really nice to me.” After succeeding with his previous move, Kong Sheng immediately followed it up with more, each with a great deal of energy. This type of kung fu is fast and furious. More powerful than anything Zhang Wuji has seen before. He can only try to dodge the oncoming blows.

As Kong Sheng attacks continuously with his Dragon Claws, Zhang Wuji continuously backs away. They kept facing each other, one moving forward, while the other one moving back. After nine consecutive misses by Kong Sheng, he’s still about a yard away from Zhang Wuji. Although he moves forward at lightning speed, Zhang Wuji always manage to back off at the same pace. While Zhang Wuji still has not countered any attacks, one can already see just who has the edge in lightness kung fu. One is moving forward, while the other is backpedaling. The difference in difficulty between the two is easy to see. Since he could not catch up, Kong Sheng’s power in the legs is obviously much worse. Had Zhang Wuji turned around to run, he could have easily left Kong Sheng long behind. Essentially, the reason Zhang Wuji didn’t turn around is so he can see Kong Sheng use his Dragon Claws. By the time he saw the thirty-seventh claw, he realized that it was move number eight, ‘Cloud Palm form’. Obviously, Zhang Wuji does not know its name. But he knows perfectly how one would execute such a move.

This Dragon Claws only has thirty-six moves. Its aim is to be fast and deadly, not concentrating on changing variations. Whenever Kong Sheng has met a formidable enemy, he has always gained the initiative by using this Dragon Claws. Never has he needed more than twelve moves to win the fights. From the thirteenth move on, he has practiced them, but never used them in battle. He can’t believe that he couldn’t win even after using all thirty-six moves. By his thirty-seventh move, he had to reuse his previous ones. Kong Sheng thought, “This kid only has great lightness kung fu

and great agility. That's why he can avoid my strikes. But if we truly stop and fight, I doubt he can handle twelve strikes of my Dragon Claws." Zhang Wuji by now had already figured out the workings of the Dragon Claw. He found no weaknesses, but Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi can create weaknesses from any type of forms. He thought, "At this time, I can easily kill him. But Shaolin has always held a great reputation, and this monk is one of the three most important people in Shaolin. If I beat him today, where is the face for Shaolin? Yet it's impossible to simply make him back down willingly. His kung fu, after all, is much better than the Kong Dong elders." Just as he's deciding on what to do, he heard Kong Sheng say, "Little kid, you're just trying to run away, not fighting!" Zhang Wuji said, "Fighting is..." Kong Sheng, knowing that Zhang Wuji's chi cannot flow efficiently while speaking, and takes advantage of the situation. 'Swoosh, Swoosh', two more strikes shot out. Zhang Wuji again floated away, as he continued his sentence, "...also fine. If I defeat you, reverend, what will you do?" He did not pause at all during this sentence. Had someone listened with his eyes closed, he might've thought that Zhang Wuji said it while sitting down. No one would believe that he spoke while dodging five attacks from Kong Sheng. Kong Sheng said, "If I lose to you in a true fight, you can feel free to kill me." Zhang Wuji said, "Oh, I certainly don't have that in mind! If I lose, obviously you can do what you wish with me. But should I win, I hope Shaolin will leave Brightness Peak today." Kong Sheng said, "My martial brother is the leader of our group. I do not have a say in the decision-making. Besides, I don't believe I can possibly lose to a kid like you."

Zhang Wuji suddenly got an idea, and says, "Shaolin Dragon Claws' thirty-two strokes have no weakness. It can really be considered the most powerful claw technique in the world. Except it seems that you are using the Dragon Claws a bit wrong." Kong Sheng said angrily, "Fine! If you can break my

Dragon Claws, I'll immediately go back to Shaolin, never to leave the door again!" Zhang Wuji said, "That won't be necessary!" The others there cheered loudly as they watched this conversation. Because during this conversation, the two fighters never did take a break in fighting. In fact, they moved faster and faster as the battle went on, yet the tones for their conversation remained clear and calm, showing no signs of breakage. By the time Zhang Wuji finished his last sentence "That won't be necessary", his body flew up and then began to spin, spinning four times quickly in midair, each time higher than the last, until he made a final flip, before landing soft as a feather down to the ground far away. The watchers could only stare in awe as they watched. If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, no one would have believed that someone could possess such amazing lightness kung fu. Even the Green Bat King, who thought his own lightness kung fu is unparalleled, can only sigh in reverence. As Zhang Wuji landed, Kong Sheng also moved up to him, but didn't attack. He asks loudly, "Are we going to start now?" Zhang Wuji says, "Sure. After you." Kong Sheng says, "You're not going to back off?" Zhang Wuji smiled and says, "If I take another step back, I'll admit defeat."

Although the top fighters of the Ming sect are all too injured to move, their hearings are still fine. All of them gasped when they heard Zhang Wuji say this. They are all experienced in the martial world, and realize the power of Kong Sheng's Dragon Claws. To them, even trying to block one hit would be a difficult task. No matter how good Zhang Wuji is, he still would likely need more than a hundred moves before winning. How can he possibly not take a step back during this time? Only to hear Kong Sheng say, "That won't be necessary. If I win, I want to win fairly. If I lose, I want to lose willingly." When he finished, he yelled, "Look out!" Kong Sheng then feints with his left hand, while his right hand carries a strong wind from the other side, reaching for Zhang

Wuji's Bowl Lacking Point on his left shoulder. Zhang Wuji realizes, from the feint, that this is another 'Cloud Palm Form'. So he also feints with his left hand, while his right hand shot out to Kong Sheng's Bowl Lacking Point on his left shoulder. Both fighters use the same move, without any difference. Zhang Wuji moves second, but reaches his target first, gaining the initiative. While Kong Sheng's right hand is still a few inches away from Zhang Wuji's left shoulder, Zhang Wuji's five fingers has reached the opponent's Bowl Lacking Point. Kong Sheng only felt a little sting on his pressure point, as he lost all strength on his right hand. Yet Zhang Wuji did not apply any more power to his claws, instead pulling back his hand. After being stunned for a moment, Kong Sheng's both hands shot out, attacking with the 'Pearl Taking Form', aiming for Zhang Wuji's left and right Sun Point. Once again Zhang Wuji moved afterwards, and again, landed the attack first, grabbing both of Kong Sheng's Sun Point. The Sun Point is of paramount importance to a fighter. If reached, it would mean certainly defeat. Yet Zhang Wuji simply lightly touches the Sun Point. He then spins around, and changes into the Dragon Claws' seventeenth move 'Moon Catching Form', aiming Kong Sheng's Wind Manor Point at the back of his head.

Zhang Wuji had already stunned Kong Sheng by grabbing his Sun Point, but his usage of the 'Moon Catching Form' left Kong Sheng dumbfounded. Kong Sheng said, "How... how did you steal Shaolin's Dragon Claws?"

Zhang Wuji responds with a chuckle, "The martial arts under the Heavens are hardly all unique. It's only humans who forcibly divide them into different sects. How can you be sure that this Dragon Claws is unique to Shaolin?" But in his mind, Zhang Wuji realizes, "This Dragon Claws really is something. I bet it took Shaolin hundreds of years to refine it into the form today. It probably is unparalleled in the world. If I weren't

using Dragon Claws to fight him, I don't think I can win."

Kong Sheng lowers his head, trying to digest this strange information. When it comes to the Dragon Claws, not even his martial brothers can match him in terms of skill. So how can this youngster twice move after him, yet also twice landing the blow first? Plus, this youngster's accuracy, speed, and power are all incredible, as if he's been practicing for tens of years.

All the eyes in the crowds stared at him as he stood there in silence. The two moves were over in a blur. So other than the top-level fighters, no one knows just who won the exchange. But they do see that Zhang Wuji still carries a carefree expression, while Kong Sheng is agonizing in his thoughts.

Kong Sheng suddenly roars loudly, swiftly stepping up, his palms powerful as a thunderstorm, 'Wind Grasping Form', 'Shadow Catching Form', 'Zither Playing Form', 'Drum Beating Form', 'Carrying Form', 'Sham Striking Form', 'Evil Wrapping Form', 'Weakness Blocking Form', all eight moves one after another with lightning speed. Zhang Wuji, keeping his calm, begins grasping winds and catching shadows, playing zither and beating drums, carrying and striking shams, wrapping evil and blocking weaknesses, also making the same eight moves smoothly in a row, each time he goes second, but strikes first.

Kong Sheng's eight strikes came continuously, looking more like eight different variations of a single move, each with unparalleled speed. Who would've thought that Zhang Wuji is even faster? Every time he lands the blow first. Every time Kong Sheng makes a move, he has to take a step back. By the time he has retreated seven steps, he begins to use 'Evil Wrapping Form' and 'Weakness Blocking Form'. These are the last two moves of the Dragon Claws. Their appearance seems

to be filled with weaknesses, making the user look unsure of himself. Yet both of these forms are based on the principle of counterattacking. Every single weakness is a trap that allows for some very potent counterattacks. Although Dragon Claws is a Hard style of martial arts, it's last two moves changes to a very Soft style. Zhang Wuji takes another breath and steps up, also using the same final two forms, but immediately changed to a 'Cloud Palm Form' afterwards.

Kong Sheng thought ecstatically, "Ha! Finally fell into my trap." He sees Zhang Wuji's right arm entering the trap, unable to possibly retreat. Kong Sheng recoils his arms and then spun them from the top, striking down on Zhang Wuji's arms from above. He sees that this youngster is proficient in Shaolin kung fu. Afraid that he may be related to the temple, and knowing that Zhang Wuji had been lenient with him earlier, Kong Sheng did not try to take his life, only seeking to break his bones. Yet just before his attack landed, he felt a strong and warm inner power flowing into his chest, preventing his arms from going down further. At this time, Zhang Wuji's five fingers have already reached his body.

Immediately, Kong Sheng's heart sank. Tens of years of hard practice on this Dragon Claws, thinking it is unrivaled in the martial world, has now gone up in smoke. He nods and says, "Mr. Zeng's Dragon Claws are indeed much better than mine." His left hand then grabs his right hand, about to break them, when he felt numbness on his left wrist. Only to see Zhang Wuji applying some chi there, and says, "I simply used Shaolin's Dragon Claws to defeat you. What's the shame in that? Had I used any other type of kung fu, I could not have won today."

Kong Sheng, in his moment of failure, had wanted to break his own fingers, never to practice kung fu again. Yet when he heard this, he realizes that Zhang Wuji had been protecting

Shaolin's integrity this whole time. If Zhang Wuji hasn't done this, then Shaolin's history and place in the martial world could have gone down in flames today. After he thought this through, Kong Sheng could only feel gratitude for Zhang Wuji, and says, "Mr. Zeng's kindness is truly incredible. You have my total admiration." Zhang Wuji responds, "I'm sorry for striking an elder. Please accept my apologies." Kong Sheng chuckled, and says, "I can't believe this Dragon Claws can have such amazing power in your hands. Should you have time, please come to Shaolin so you can give some more pointers." Usually, this sort of sentence has a connotation of challenging someone to a fight. Yet Kong Sheng's tone did not carry any of that meaning. He really does deeply respect Zhang Wuji's kung fu.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly responds, "Oh, you are flattering me. Shaolin's martial arts are vast and deep, while mine is shallow and thin. Should we be fated to meet again, I would also like reverend you to share some advice with me." His words are also just as sincere.

Due to his lack of management skills, Kong Sheng doesn't hold any position of authority within the temple. But his reputation in Shaolin is extremely good. Everyone deeply respects his character and martial arts skills. So when Shaolin's people see that he admits to defeat so sincerely, they do not complain. Plus, seeing how Zhang Wuji did everything in his power to keep Shaolin from losing face, they all knew that Shaolin couldn't challenge him further today. Kong Zhi is the leader of this whole attack, and knows that the six sects cannot simply back down like this. Seeing the problem with the situation at hand, he gave a look to the Master of Hua Shan sect, XianYu Tong. Xian YuTong is the brain behind this attack on Brightness Peak. When he sees Kong Zhi asking for help, he immediately steps into the arena. Zhang Wuji sees a forty-some year old middle-aged scholar come up, handsome and charismatic, and begins to

like him a bit. Zhang Wuji asks, "What does the elder wish of me?" Before XianYu Tong could respond, Yin TianZheng says, "This is the Master of Hua Shan sect, XianYu Tong. Although his kung fu is average, he's very devious. You need to watch out." When Zhang Wuji heard the name, he thought, "Hey, this name sounds familiar. I wonder where I heard it before?" Only to see XianYu Tong walk up to a couple of yards in front of Zhang Wuji before stopping. He waves his hand and says, "After you, Mr. Zeng." Zhang Wuji also returns the favor, and adds, "After you, Master XianYu."

XianYu Tong says, "Young Hero Zeng's kung fu is simply marvelous, to be able to defeat the Kong Dong elders and even the Mystic Reverend Kong Sheng. I truly respect you. So may I ask, who is your teacher? Which sect did you come from?"

Zhang Wuji has to think of how to respond, so he remains silent.

XianYu Tong laughed, and then speaks loudly, "I wonder why Young Hero Zeng is so afraid to speak about your mentor? As a wise man once said, 'When you see someone worthy, you hold them in high regards, when you see someone not worthy...' When Zhang Wuji heard this, he immediately thought of 'See Death but Won't Help'*. He then remembered that five years ago in the Butterfly Valley, Hu QingNuo told him that XianYu Tong killed his sister. At that time, Zhang Wuji thought, "This XianYu Tong really is a terrible person. If he doesn't get bad luck later in life, then the gods really need their eyes re-examined." The words of that day came back to him, "A youngster got the Golden Bug Poison of the Miao tribe. He should've died from the poison, but I treated him for three days and three nights, using all my powers to cure him. We became sworn brothers afterward. Sighs. Who would've thought that he later killed my sister... My poor

sister... Ever since our parent's death, we had only each other for support." When Hu QingNuo said this, his face was so frail and miserable, making Zhang Wuji quite sad. Hu QingNuo then said that he later tried to seek revenge, but Hua Shan sect simply has too many powerful people, and XianYu Tong is too cunning. So Hu QingNuo almost died in his hands. When Zhang Wuji thought of all this, he raised his eyebrows, and his eyes brightened, staring at XianYu Tong. Zhang Wuji feels the need to teach this person a lesson, so he chuckled, and then said, "I was never poisoned at the Miao Tribe, nor did I kill the sister of my best friend, why would I have anything to hide?"

*This made a lot more sense in Chinese, since the two phrases are similar.

XianYu Tong is instantly shaken when he heard this, and cold sweat pours down his face. After Hu QingNuo saved his life, he and Hu QingNuo's sister Hu QingYang fell in love. He married Hu QingYang, and she became pregnant. But later XianYu Tong wanted to be the Master of Hua Shan, so he left behind Hu QingYang. Then he married the only daughter of the former Hua Shan Master, resulting in Hu QingYang committing suicide. This is a story that XianYu Tong kept secret for years now. Yet somehow this little kid found out about it. How could he not be shocked? XianYu Tong immediately begins to think, "Since this kid knows my secret, I must kill him. It would be disastrous for him to reveal this to the world." This prompted him to regain his intensity. XianYu Tong says, "If you won't reveal your teacher's name, I guess I'll have to test out your amazing skills then. Let's just have a friendly duel, so please don't hurt me too much." As he said this his left hand shot out at Zhang Wuji's head, yelling, "Let us start!" He obviously doesn't want to give Zhang Wuji a chance to say something else, which Zhang Wuji has figured out. He easily blocked off the oncoming blow and keeps

taking, “I know Hua Shan’s kung fu is great. So I don’t need to fight to test it out. But your ‘Repaying Kindness with Reprisal*’ skill is really quite unmatched, don’t you agree?”

*For the life of me I can’t think of the right English word for this. I think it’s a pretty simple word too. Or maybe not...

XianYu Tong immediately attacks again to prevent him from talking further, using a top move from the seventy-two road ‘Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art’. He closed his fan in his right hand, and held it like a snake’s head. His left hand uses a type of Eagle Claw move. The snake is used to pierce into the opponent, while the eagle grabs him. The two hands use two completely different types of techniques. This ‘Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art’ has been the top kung fu in the Hua Shan sect for over a hundred years, and can overwhelm the opponent by attacking together with great speed and accuracy.

Against normal people, this kung fu can easily mystify the enemy and prevent them from blocking properly. But Zhang Wuji easily figured out the intricacies after only a few moves. He knows that XianYu Tong’s skills are much worse than Kong Sheng’s, so he parried all the attacks quickly. Then he says, “Master YuXian, I have a question I need to ask. When you were poisoned that year, and were about to die. That person spent three days and three nights to cure you, and became your sworn brother. So why were you so cruel, killing his sister in return?”

XianYu Tong can’t answer his question, so he scolded, “Hu...” He wanted to say “Hu Shou Ba Dao*”, and then shoot down Zhang Wuji’s accusations with a false story. He is well known for his cunning in terms of word usage, so this comes easily to him. His main objective is to break Zhang Wuji’s concentration, so he can sneak in for a fatal blow. Because

after seeing the fight against Kong Sheng, he knows that he cannot win on kung fu ability alone.

*Hu Shou Ba Dao means bullsh_t.

Unfortunately, just as he said the word “Hu”, he felt a powerful palm strike, pushing in front of his chest, preventing him from finishing the sentence. In the meantime, he felt as if his lungs are being sucked out by the opponent’s palm power, and hurriedly gathered his inner chi for protection. Then he heard Zhang Wuji say, “That’s right, that’s right! You do remember that her surname is ‘Hu’. Why didn’t you finish saying her name? Ms. Hu suffered so much in your hands, so don’t you feel even the slightest guilt?” Trying to regain his breath, XianYu Tong quickly made three attacks, releasing the lock Zhang Wuji’s palm had on his chest. When he finally caught his breath again, XianYu Tong says, “You...” When he got here, he felt yet another wind of chi pressing into his chest, and his speech stopped. Zhang Wuji said, “A man should always admit to what he did. Right is right. Wrong is wrong. Why are you so indecisive? Didn’t the Butterfly Valley Mystic Doctor Hu QingNuo save your life? Didn’t you kill his sister?” He doesn’t know how Hu Qingang died, so he cannot give more details. But XianYu Tong thought that he knew everything, and his face became even paler.

The audience all knows that XianYu Tong is a master at arguing. So they’re all extremely surprised that he could not speak up against Zhang Wuji. Because of this, they all felt that Zhang Wuji must have been speaking the truth. Unfortunately for XianYu Tong, he could not plead his innocence with Zhang Wuji pressuring his lungs. The others only see Zhang Wuji’s fists dances in the air, easily parrying the attacks of XianYu Tong, then counterattack with his own fist. Not even the top fighters can see the weakness of his moves. Most members of the Hua Shan sect could only shake

their heads when they see their Master getting pummeled both physically and verbally. Although some felt that he must have some trick up his sleeves. Only to hear Zhang Wuji say loudly, "For us people in the martial world, it's important to repay kindness with kindness. Hu QingNuo is obviously a member of the Ming sect. You owe your life to the Ming sect, yet you come to attack it? He saved your life, yet you kill his relative? Where is your shame? How can you possibly be the Master of a whole sect?" XianYu Tong suddenly regained his breath again, and says, "Little bastard, stop your lies!" He then immediately pointed his fan in front of Zhang Wuji's face, and then opened it. Zhang Wuji suddenly smelled a faint scent, and he immediately became dizzy, faltering back a bit. Then he only felt the whole world spinning, and that gold stars were dancing in front of him... XianYu Tong yells, "Little bastard, let me show you the power of my 'Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art'." He quickly moves forward, five fingers reaching for Zhang Wuji's Yuan Yi Point. He figured that Zhang Wuji couldn't possibly block this move. Yet for some reason, it came up empty.

The Hua Shan disciples all yelled, "'Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art' rules!" "Our master XianYu has mystical powers!" "Now you'll see some real kung fu!" Zhang Wuji chuckled, and blew his breath towards XianYu Tong's nose. XianYu Tong suddenly smelled a sweet scent, and became dizzy. He became so scared his soul almost popped out. Then he drops to his knees in front of Zhang Wuji, as if begging him for something. This caught everyone off guard. They all saw Zhang Wuji seemingly injured just a moment ago. Yet how could he make XianYu Tong drop to his knees in such a short time? Does he really know witchcraft or something? Zhang Wuji bents down and takes the fan, then yells, "Hua Shan is considered a righteous sect, so how can you have such an amazing poison skill. Look at this, everyone." He opened the fan lightly, and flipped around so everyone can

see both sides. He continues, "Who would've thought that this fan has a hidden trigger for poison!" As he speaks, he walks over to a flower tree, takes down a few flowers, and waves the fan in front of them. In an instant, the flowers all withered.

This shocked everyone, and they all thought, "What kind of poison is this? How can it be so powerful?" Only to hear XianYu Tong lie on the ground, screaming in pain like a pig to be slaughtered. Kung fu experts have a very high tolerance for pain. Under almost any circumstance, they would not yell pain in front of others. So his yells made the all the Hua Shan sect members turn pale. XianYu Tong then screams, "Hurry... hurry and kill me.... Just kill me..." Zhang Wuji says, "But I do have a way to cure you, except I don't know what kind of poison you used."

XianYu Tong screams, "This... this is golden bug poison... golden bug poison... hurry... kill me... Ah..."

The younger generations may not know about this poison, but the elders were shocked at these words. Some of the more righteous people begin to scold XianYu Tong. For the Golden Bug Poison is considered one of the deadliest poisons in the world, no taste and no smell. The poisoned person feels like being eaten by thousands of bugs, the result unimaginable. Even if you have godly powers, a person who doesn't know any kung fu can kill you in this state. Zhang Wuji then asks, "How did you poison yourself when you are the one who hid it in here?" XianYu Tong says, "I... don't know, I don't know..." As he says this, he started to roll on the floor, scratching everywhere. Zhang Wuji says, "You released the poison in your fan to attack me, but I used my inner power to force it back out. Do you have anything else to say?"

XianYu Tong says, "It's my fault... my fault..." He put his hands to his throat, wanting to commit suicide. But after getting poisoned, he has no strength in his hands. This poison is so powerful it forces you to live, and keeps your mind clear so you can feel the agony. Years ago, he tried to leave a Miao girl after toying with her. She then poisoned him with the golden bug poison. But she had hoped that he would change his mind, so she only used a small amount. XianYu Tong was able to escape, and stole some of her poison before he left. But soon afterwards, he fell unconscious. By coincidence, Hu QingNuo was collecting herbs in that area, saving him. Afterwards, XianYu Tong began to raise this type of bug so he can use it in his fan. Whenever he applies the proper inner power to the switch, the poison will come out. At first, when fighting Zhang Wuji, he couldn't apply any inner power. It's only at the end, when Zhang Wuji released his hold, that he used the poison.

Thankfully, Zhang Wuji's inner power is without equal. In the critical moment, he held his breath, then forced out the small amount of poison in his body with his chi. Had he had less inner strength, or didn't react fast enough, then it would be him on the ground rather than XianYu Tong. After reading Wang NanGu's Book of Poisons*, he knows just how powerful this golden bug poison is. So he quickly blocked off the circulation of the poison into his body. Zhang Wuji thought to himself, "I do have to save him, but I need him to confess his crimes first." So he says, "I can make the antidote, but you have to answer my questions first. If you lie, I'll just leave you here, letting you to endure seven days and seven nights of pain before dying."

* Wang NanGu is Hu QingNuo's wife. Zhang Wuji grabbed her book when he saw her corpse.

XianYu Tong, despite his pain, can still hear clearly. He

thought, "Back then, that Miao girl also said that I'll be in pain for seven days and seven nights. How can this little kid know this too?" But he still doesn't believe that Zhang Wuji can possibly cure his poison, and said, "You... can't cure me." Zhang Wuji closed the fan and pointed at his waist. "If I make a cut here, and apply the right medicine, then you'll be saved." XianYu Tong immediately responds, "You're... you're...right." Zhang Wuji then asks, "Have you done anything you felt guilty about in life?" XianYu Tong says, "N... no." Zhang Wuji says, "Fine, have it your way." XianYu Tong hurriedly added, "Wait... I'll say it." But after all, he is in front of his peers. So the words obviously have trouble coming out.

Suddenly, two people came out from the Hua Shan sect, one tall one short, both look around fifty, their hands holding large sabers. Walking in front of Zhang Wuji, the short old man says, "Mr. Zeng, you can kill us Hua Shan people, but you can't play around with us. It's not heroic to do such a thing to our Master XianYu." Zhang Wuji put together his fists and bowed, asking, "And your names are?" The short old man says, "You're not worthy of asking for my name." He bent down and about to carry XianYu Tong back, but Zhang Wuji quickly pushed him out of the way saying, "His body is filled with poison. If you even touch him, you'll be poisoned too. I suggest you be careful in the future." That short man froze for a second, and shuddered. Only to hear XianYu Tong scream, "Hurry and save me... save me... Bai Yuan... Brother Bai... I used this poison to kill him... but that's it...."

When he said this, everyone's face in the Hua Shan sect turned pale. The short man asked, "You killed Bai Yuan? This is the truth? Then why do you say the Ming sect killed him?" XianYu Tong screams, "Brother Bai... please don't do that..." "Brother Bai, I know you died a horrible death, but why did you blackmail me back then... You had to speak about Ms. Hu in front of the master. You know master would never forgive

me for that. I ... I had to silence you. Please... forgive me..." He then continued, "I killed you, so I had to blame it on the Ming sect. But.... But I burnt so much money for you, I took care of your wife, kids, and parents..." Although the sun shines brightly on the square, everyone's hearts were filled with coldness upon hearing this. The people in the Hua Shan sect who knew Bai Yuan were even more shocked. Zhang Wuji also didn't expect this response. He originally wanted XianYu Tong to speak about Lady Hu, not his own martial brother. But Zhang Wuji didn't know that since Hu QingYang committed suicide, XianYu Tong, with his playboy personality, never felt all that badly about it. But he did kill Bai Yuan with his own hand, and with the same poison that's in him now. So he felt like Bai Yuan's ghost has come seeking for revenge.

Zhang Wuji doesn't know who Bai Yuan is, but from XianYu Tong's words, he can tell that the blame was put on the Ming sect. Most likely this is the reason why the Hua Shan sect came to Brightness Peak today. So he yells in the Hua Shan direction, "Listen to me, people of Hua Shan. Your elder Bai was not killed by the Ming sect. Please do not take out your revenge on the wrong people."

That tall old man waved his sword up, about to bring it down on XianYu Tong. But Zhang Wuji lightly flicked his saber back with a finger, bouncing it back. That tall old man said, "This is a traitor of Hua Shan. How can we let him live?" Zhang Wuji says, "I promised that I'll cure him, so I will. You can do what you want with him later."

That short old man says, "Brother, he's right." He then swiftly kicked XianYu in the back, sending him flying, finally falling down in front of the Hua Shan group. Although XianYu Tong has many loyal disciples, none would dare catch him due to the poison.

That short old man says to Zhang Wuji, "We are the martial uncles of XianYu Tong. Today you have resolved a big problem within the Hua Shan sect. For this, we thank you!" Both of them then bowed, as Zhang Wuji quickly returned the favor, saying, "It's ok. It's ok." The short man then pulled out his saber and says loudly, "But you have ruined the reputation of the Hua Shan sect. For this, my brother and I will fight you to the death!" The tall man also says, "Yes, we shall fight you the death." Oddly enough, he's much taller and bigger, but he seemingly follows the shorter old man's orders. Zhang Wuji says, "Which sect hasn't had a bad apple in its history? Your reputation won't be affected by one person." The tall old man says, "You think so?" Zhang Wuji says, "Yes." The tall old man says, "Big brother, in that case, let's just forget about it." He makes it sounds like he respects Zhang Wuji, but in reality, he fears Zhang Wuji's ability. But the short old man says, "First we take care of outside enemies, then we take care of inside problems. If we don't kill him today, where's the face of our Hua Shan sect?" The tall man says, "Fine. Little kid, I hope you don't object to us fighting you two on one. If you do, then just admit defeat now." The short man raised his eyebrows, says, "Brother, what are you..." Zhang Wuji responds, "That's fine with me. If you two lose, then Hua Shan cannot further harass the Ming sect today." The tall man, ecstatic with the response, yelled, "If both of us fight you, then you can't possibly win. We have a special double saber art. Its power is unlimited, capable of sweeping thousands of enemies. So you're definitely going to lose. But of course, it's too late to take back your words now." Zhang Wuji says, "Of course I won't take back my words. So please be lenient with me, elders." The tall old man says, "My saber is never lenient. When we use this double saber technique, we become more and more powerful, until the power cannot be stopped. I can see that you're not a bad person, so I'm feeling a bit sad that you'll have to die." The short old man yelled, "Geez. Can you stop yapping for a

minute?" The tall old man says, "Sure, but I have to remind him, this double saber art is a reverse technique, different from normal techniques..." The short old man cuts in, "Shut up!" He turns towards Zhang Wuji and says, "I'm coming!" Followed by slashing his saber towards Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji blocked the blow with XianYu Tong's fan, which prompted the tall old man to say, "Hey, hey! We can't compete like this! This fan is too poisonous. We have to get rid of it before someone gets hurt."

Zhang Wuji responds, "You're right. This sort of thing shouldn't exist." So he pointed the fan to the ground and threw it deep into the ground, making a tiny hole in the process. This type of ability is something no one else can emulate, and prompted wows from the audience. The tall old man then states, "Now, go find yourself a weapon."

Zhang Wuji originally didn't plan on fighting. But with the current situation, he knew that he needed to show off in order to gain their respect. So he said, "What type of weapon would the elder wish for me to use?" The tall old man reached out and patted him on the shoulders, smiling, "You're a funny little kid. You even care to ask me which weapon to use?" Zhang Wuji knows that the pat was just for fun, and didn't think much of it. But the others were all shocked. They wondered, what if the tall old man decided to apply some inner power to the pat, or sealed his pressure point? Wouldn't Zhang Wuji lose immediately? They of course don't know that Zhang Wuji has Jiu Yang Shen Gong for protection. So none of those things would work. The tall old man laughed, "Since your kung fu is so good. I bet you can use all the eighteen standard weapons very well. And it would be too much to ask of you to fight bare-handed." Zhang Wuji smiled, "Actually, bare-handed is ok too." The tall old man looked around, trying to find the worst possible weapon for him. He suddenly saw some large rocks, and said,

"I'll let you use a nice, powerful weapon." As he spoke, he pointed to those rocks and started to laugh. These rocks have got to be two hundred to three hundred pounds. If you don't have a lot of strength, you can't even move one of them. How can anyone use one as a weapon? Besides, it's quite smooth, so there's no place to hold it.

The tall old man wanted to purposely gave Zhang Wuji a hard dilemma. So Zhang Wuji would back off, and they won't have to fight. However, Zhang Wuji smiled instead, and responds, "This is a strange weapon. Are you trying to test my strength?" As he spokem he walked over to the rock and lifted it with his left hand. He then yelled, "Let's start!" Immediately, he flew to where the two old men stood with the rock in hand. The audience could not help but stare in shock, even forgetting to cheer on. The tall old man yelled, "This... this is impossible!" The short old man realizes that today's opponent is much more powerful than anyone he has ever seen. Afer he calmed down and collected himself, the short old man yelled, "I'm coming!" Green light sparkled, as the saber advanced forward, aiming towards Zhang Wuji's right arm. The tall old man asked, "Brother, are we really going to fight?" The short old man said, "Of course." The saber slashed a semi-circle before changing directions, aiming for Zhang Wuji's left shoulder. Zhang Wuji moved away, only to see another green light, as the tall old man also began his attack. Zhang Wuji said, "Good move." Turned around and blocked with his rock, causing sparks to fly. In a smooth motion, Zhang Wuji then pushed the blocking rock forward, onto the tall old man. The tall old man stared in awe, saying, "You can use techniques with a rock?" The short old man then yelled, "Brother, watch out!" Then slashed the sword in a reverse manner, creating a crescent image, curving towards Zhang Wuji. The two old men continuously attack in synchronization, while Zhang Wuji gathers his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to roll the rock left and right. Although the

reverse double sabers' powers are great, this rock is simply too big. No matter what, they cannot strike past it. The tall old man then yelled, "Wait. You're getting too big of an advantage in terms of weaponry. This isn't fair." Zhang Wuji chuckled, saying, "In that case, I won't use it then." and threw the rock up into the air. As the two old men stared at the rock, Zhang Wuji quickly dashed forward and sealed their pressure points. So the two old men can only stare helplessly as the rock falls towards them.

The masses all let out a collect gasp. But at the last moment, Zhang Wuji came back and pushed the rock away. He then gently tapped the chest of the two old men, and said with a smile, "Sorry about that. It was just a little joke." The short old man's face turned gray, and sighed, "Forget it, forget it!" But the tall old man shook his head and said, "This doesn't count." Zhang Wuji said, "Why?" The tall old man said, "You only won because of your superior strength, not techniques." Zhang Wuji said, "Fine. Then let's play some more." The tall old man said, "Of course, but we have to switch it up a bit. Otherwise, if you keep getting all these advantages, it would be quite unfair for us, don't you think?" Zhang Wuji nodded, "Yes, of course."

Xiao Zhao had been watching intently on the side, but now stepped up, scraping her cheek with her hand, yelling, "Shame on you! Look at how long your beard is. And yet you keep saying about being at a disadvantage when the truth is the opposite?" The tall old man laughed, said, "What does a girl like you know? I've eaten more salt than you have rice. I've walked across more bridges than you have roads. Oh, be quiet, little kid." He then turned around and said to Zhang Wuji, "If you don't want to, we don't have to compete. After all, you didn't win or lose. Perhaps we can wait a few years before dueling again..." The short old man became increasingly annoyed at his martial brother. As a respected

elder, who could he say such unreasonable things to a youngster. So he cut in, "We admit defeat. We'll do what you say." Zhang Wuji said, "I simply wish for there to be peace between the Ming sect and the six major sects. That is all." The tall old man then cut in loudly, "What are you talking about? We haven't competed with the new method yet. Are you trying to back out of that now?" The short old man stopped talking. He knows that although his tall brother acts foolishly, his thick face just might save them this time. Although it's not righteous to do such a thing to a youngster, but at least if the plan succeeds, they won't look too bad.

Zhang Wuji said, "So what is the elder's suggestions?" The tall old man said, "We have a Reverse Double Saber Art. You've already seen it. But Kun Lun also has a Forward Double Sword Art, which is also exquisite. They match up perfectly with our sabers. Should we combine our strength, two forms turn to four, four turns to eight. A mixture of Ying and Yang..." When he said this, he shook his head and said, "Too powerful, too powerful! There's no way you can block it!" Zhang Wuji turned to the Kun Lun sect and said, "So who would like to come out from the Kun Lun sect?" The tall old man cut in and said, "Obviously, only the Iron Zither Couple are worthy of fighting with us. I just don't know if Master He has the courage." The members of the six sects all thought happily, "This old man really isn't stupid after all. He's seeking the help of the top two fighters of Kun Lun." He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian looked at each other. They don't know who these two old guys are, but since they're the martial uncles of XianYu Tong, they must be respected elders. Besides, since they don't live on the central plains, they don't know too many people anyway. The couple thought, "They can't beat this little kid, so want to drag us into it. This way, if we win, then can also save some face." Only to hear the tall old man say, "I'm not surprised that they won't come out. Although their Forward Double Sword Art is great, it's

still not quite as good as our Reverse Double Saber Art.” Ban ShuXian yelled angrily, “Who are you?” The tall old man said, “My surname is also He, Let’s go, Mrs. He.” His little joke prompted the crowd to start laughing*.

*I’m not too sure about the joke here. But his words are suppose to be very funny. So let’s just assume that it is.

Ban ShuXian has power in Kun Lun sect is near that of the master. Even He TaiChong has to defer to her sometimes. For years, she has acted like the queen on the Kun Lun Mountain. So how can she stand for this? Out comes the sword, aiming directly at the tall old man’s left arm. This all went in a blur. One moment, her hands are empty, the next, a sword appeared in her hands and is only inches away from the tall old man’s left shoulder. The tall old man quickly blocked turned his saber to block, ‘Dang’, the sword and the saber struck each other. Ban ShuXian used the ‘Plunder with the Golden Needle’ move, while the tall old man countered with the ‘No Plunder Will Succeed’, one goes forward, the other in reverse. The forms really are the exact opposites. As both fighters stepped back after the blow, they deeply became impressed with the other person. Both began to respect each other more. They thought, “These two techniques really do complement each other perfectly.” This is like a lonely person suddenly finding a friend. Ban ShuXian thought, “Their Reverse Saber really is something. If we fight together, our powers would grow exponentially. Besides, if they can’t beat this little kid, we might not either. Although it’s really terrible for four famous people like us to fight together, at least we can say that it’s the Hua Shan sect’s idea.” So she called out to He TaiChong, “Hey, come over here!” Although He TaiChong would never disobey his wife, he still has to act like a master of a sect in front of so many people. “Humph.” He called out to four servants. As one carried a sword, one carried an iron zither, the other two servants carried Buddha

symbols, the five of them walked out into the arena. The servant with the sword then handed it over to He TaiChong, who took it, and promptly called off the servants. Ban ShuXian said to He TaiChong, "Hua Shan's Reverse Double Saber Art isn't too bad. Let's go ahead and play around with this little kid. See just how powerful this combination can be." As she finished and turned around, Ban ShuXian suddenly said "Huh?" upon seeing Zhang Wuji. "You... you..." She has only been apart from Zhang Wuji for five years, so although he has grown up these years, she still can see the resemblance from their last encounter. Zhang Wuji said, "Do you really want to talk about the past? My name is Zeng AhNuo." Ban ShuXian realizes the meanings behind his words. If she reveals his identity, then he will reveal all those things her husband and her did to him in the past. So she said, "Young Hero Zeng's skills really have advanced quite a bit. I congratulate you. Let's see how well you've progressed." Zhang Wuji said, "I've long known the fame of the couple's mystical sword arts. I hope you'll be lenient on me." He TaiChong said, "What type of weapon would you use?" When Zhang Wuji saw him, he immediately thought of the poison-sucking snake, which died when he fell off the cliff. He also thought of that day when they went to Wu Dang and forced his parent to commit suicide. Then, he remembered when He TaiChong forced Yang BuHui and him to take the poison. Thankfully, Yang Xiao was luckily there to save him, or he would've died that day in the mountains. With all these things in mind, Zhang Wuji's temper flared, thinking, "Although I can't kill you today, He TaiChong, I am going to give you a thorough beating." He then flew towards a nearby plum tree, and took down a plum branch before floating down. He carried the branch towards the four people, and said, "I'll use this as my weapon to test out Hua Shan and Kun Lun's high arts." No one could believe what they just heard, thinking, "How can he possibly fight against swords and sabers with this little thing?" Zhang Wuji said, "I heard

father say that former master He ZuDao was the master of zither, chess, and sword, and was known as the Three Saints of Kun Lun. Too bad I was born so late, unable to meet this great gentleman.” Everyone can see that by praising the former master, he’s belittling the He couple. Suddenly, a person came out yelling, “Little twerp. Who do you think you are, speaking that way about my mentor and master-uncle.” Only to see a longhaired Taoist appear from the crowd, holding a sword aiming towards Zhang Wuji’s back. This attack is quite silent, and done while he’s talking. So despite the appearance of a warning, it’s really a sneak attack. Zhang Wuji did not turn around. Just as the sword is about to reach his shirt, Zhang Wuji’s left foot kicked to the right. By the time the foot came back down, the sword has been stuck between his foot and the ground. That Taoist tries to pull it out, but couldn’t. Zhang Wuji turned around, and saw that this was the person he met on the ship as a child, Xi HuaZi. Zhang Wuji remembered that this person has a bad temper, and repeatedly insulted his mother. His own temper flared, and asked, “You are Taoist Xi HuaZi?”

Xi HuaZi, whose face is now bright red, did not respond. He only kept on trying to pull out the sword with all his strength. Zhang Wuji suddenly released his foot while applied some chi to the sword point with his left foot. Since Xi HuaZi didn’t expect this, he immediately fell backward on his butt. Only to hear some ‘ding ding dang dang’, as his sword broke into pieces, leaving only the handle in his hand. He’s the student of Ban ShuXian, which is why he calls He TaiChong Master-Uncle. So when he saw his mentor’s face filled with rage, he knew he had disgraced her big time. Xi HuaZi hurriedly got up, and then said, “Little bastard...” Zhang Wuji originally planned on letting him go, but when he heard Xi HuaZi disparaging his parents with the word ‘bastard’, he could not hold down his anger. In a flash he swept the branch across Xi HuaZi’s chest, sealing three of his major pressure points.

Then he said to the two old men and the He couple, "Let's start!" Ban ShuXian whispered to Xi HuaZi, "Get out of here, you think you haven't disgraced me enough already?" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes!" But he still doesn't move. Ban ShuXian then yelled, "I told you to scram, did you not hear?" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes, mentor, yes!" Although his voice sounds respectful, he still did not move. Ban ShuXian thought, "How come he's not listening to me?" Although she saw Zhang Wuji touch him with the branch, she couldn't imagine that Zhang Wuji can seal pressure points through objects. So she pushed Xi HuaZi hard on the shoulders, and yelled, "Get out of here, stop disgracing yourself."

Xi HuaZi said, "Yes, I know, mentor." His body moved a bit, but his arms and legs didn't. At this point, The He couple realized that Zhang Wuji had sealed his pressure points somehow. He TaiChong walked over and tried to unseal him, but for unfortunately, his inner power isn't enough. Xi HuaZi still could not move. Zhang Wuji pointed to Yang BuHui, and said, "Five years ago, you sealed her pressure points, then made her drink down the poisoned wine. Today I'm simply returning the favor." When the masses heard this, they all looked at Yang BuHui, seeing only a young girl. Five years ago, she must've been a little kid. It really is quite terrible for a leader of a sect to do such a disgusting thing. Ban ShuXian saw that it isn't a good idea to keep this up, so she immediately raised her sword, and began to attack Zhang Wuji. The two Hua Shan elders and He TaiChong immediately followed.

Zhang Wuji moved in a blur, passing in between the sword and saber blows, his branch almost hitting He TaiChong's face. Then Zhang Wuji's left hand flicked the short old man's saber, while his branch aimed at He TaiChong's sword. He TaiChong thought that no matter how good he is, the branch could not possibly block my sword. But Zhang Wuji's turned

the branch sideways a bit, and skimmed the side of the sword. At this instant, Zhang applied inner power to the branch, shooting out a wave of chi that propelled the sword to the side, and incidentally hit the tall old man's saber.

The tall old man yelled, "What are you doing, helping the enemy, He TaiChong?" He TaiChong's face turned red, but he couldn't say that his sword went off course because of Zhang Wuji's inner power. So he snapped back, "That's ridiculous!" and then turned his attention back to Zhang Wuji.

As He TaiChong attacked, Ban ShuXian waited from behind to cut off any escape possibilities. The two old men also utilized their reverse double sword techniques at the same time. Although they are the opposite, the sword and saber forms still follow the 8 diagrams of the Book of Changes. So they can position themselves perfectly to complement each other. As the match went out, they only attacked faster and faster. Zhang Wuji knew that this would be a tough fight. And it proved correct as the formation gave him no weaknesses to exploit. Many times, he came close to losing. If he had a real weapon in hand, he might have blocked them. But unfortunately, his attitude is too peaceful, so he just used a plum branch. Suddenly he saw the short old man's saber coming straight at him. Just as Zhang Wuji dodged it, Ban ShuXian's sword came from his back, skimming the back of his leg before he got out of the way. At this time, He TaiChong's sword once again came straight at him, while the tall and short old men attacked from top and bottom. Thinking quickly, Zhang Wuji immediately sneaked behind Xi HuaZi, forcing Ban ShuXian and He TaiChong to withdraw their next attacks. Since he couldn't figure out a way to counter this sword formation, he could only spin around Xi HuaZi, using him as a shield against oncoming attacks. In his heart, he yelled, "Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji. You really should not have been so overconfident. As they say, the

arrogant is bound to lose. You really need to keep that in mind from now on. You just thought that there is indeed no inner power kung fu better than Jiu Yang Shen Gong. No kung fu technique more exquisite than Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. But there are always someone better than you.” Laughter came from the viewers, as they see Xi HuaZi only could stare helplessly in the middle of the battle, with swords and sabers coming at him. Ban ShuXian especially felt angry, as many chances of killing Zhang Wuji were wasted because of Xi HuaZi. Then the tall old man said, “Mrs. He, if you won’t kill him, I will.” Ban ShuXian snickered, “I can’t exactly control you, can I?” The tall old man then immediately aimed his saber at Xi HuaZi. Zhang Wuji thought, “Oh no. If he dies, then I would no longer have a shield. Plus, how can I let someone die for me?” So he waved his arm, and the wind carried by his sleeves guided the tall old man’s saber away. At the same time, the short old man came from the back, his saber moving silently. Zhang Wuji immediately got out of the way, but then found that his Saber is still continuing in the same direction. So he turned back and shot out his palms towards the short old man, prompting him to stop the attack. Xi HuaZi, grateful that Zhang Wuji saved his life twice, thought, “If I live past today, I’ll make sure to get back at these two old men.” When He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian saw Zhang Wuji protecting their student, their thoughts weren’t gratitude, but rather annoyance that Xi HuaZi is still around. Hence, their attacks became even more aggressive. Although it’s nearly impossible for them to aim for Zhang Wuji in this situation, they can aim for Xi HuaZi instead, and use him as bait to make Zhang Wuji help out. Then they can take the opportunity to attack Zhang Wuji straight on. When E Mei, Wu Dang, and Shaolin saw their methods, they can only shake their heads and feeling ashamed. As the battle went on, Zhang Wuji thought, “If I can’t beat them, then it’s no big deal for me to die. But why drag down the innocent with me?” He pushed back the tall old man’s attack and then

used his branch to unseal Xi HuaZi's pressure point. The short old man came from behind aiming for Xi HuaZi, but didn't realize that his pressure point has been unsealed. Suddenly, he felt a fist hitting his nose, and blood poured out. Although the short old man's kung fu is much better than Xi HuaZi's, this blow came unexpectedly. So he couldn't dodge. When the others saw this, they all started to laugh loudly. Ban ShuXian suppressed a laugh of her own, and ordered, "Xi HuaZi, get out of here!" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes. But I still owe that tall old man a punch." But as he tried to attack the tall old man, the short old man immediately delivered a palm blow to his chest, prompting him to retreat, blood came out of his mouth. He TaiChong then came over, grabbed the back of his robe, and threw him back out into the crowd.

The four fighters might be thoroughly pissed at each other, but with Xi HuaZi out of the way, their sword and saber combination can now execute flawlessly. Now the formation matched the strength of eight top fighters, their techniques unrivaled in variations and delicacy. For when the top kung fu theories of the central plains meets the top theories of the Xi Yu, one can see that the central plains kung fu theories are much more refined. It's just that the Hua Shan and Kun Lun experts can only utilize twenty to thirty percent of their true potential; otherwise Zhang Wuji would've long been dead.

Even so, Zhang Wuji could not break the formation, and can only try to keep himself alive. Every spectator watched with their hearts pounding, only to see sabers and swords flowing like the wind, sparkling under the sun. At this moment, Zhang Wuji can still easily escape with his vastly superior lightness kung fu. But then, what about the Ming sect? With that in mind, his only choice is to drag on the fight, hoping that they will eventually tire out. Unfortunately, he does not realize that these elders have some of the best inner powers in the world, making this an impossible task.

Although the four fighters are at a huge advantage, none of them look all that pleased. They are already losing tons of face considering their reputation. How can four elders not even bring down a youngster in over three hundred moves? Thankfully, Zhang Wuji had already defeated Kong Sheng. Otherwise, this fight would already be a huge disaster.

While watching the battle, elders of each sect talked quietly with their students, taking the opportunity to teach them valuable lessons.

End of Chapter 21.

Chapter 22 - Placating the Crowd and Three Conditions

(Translated by Meh and dgfds01)



When she saw just how pale he looks, her mind became filled with unspeakable agitation and fright. After a while, Zhang Wuji regained his senses. His only thought was, "As long as I'm alive, I can't let the six major sects destroy the Ming sect." With that in mind, he and got up and said, "Is there anyone else from E Mei or Wu Dang who wants to challenge me?"

(Meh)

*Note: It's quite possible that my translations in regarding the Book of Changes are off. I don't know anything about Taoist teachings, so I can only make literal translations. Quite frankly, I have no clue what JY's talking about here.

E Mei's Master Mie Jue said to her disciples, "This youngster's kung fu is very strange, but the four fighters of Kun Lun and Hua Shan have trapped him in terms of techniques. Our righteous kung fu of central plains are broad and deep, much better than the devilish Xi Yu kung fu. The two forms uses four people. The four people occupy eight locations. The front side has eight-times-eight-for-sixty-four moves. The reverse side also has eight-times-eight-for-sixty-four moves. When combined, you have sixty-four-squared, or four thousand and ninety-two different variations. This is simply unrivaled in the world."

Zhou ZhiRuo, ever since she saw Zhang Wuji on the stage, has been worrying for his well-being. As one of Mie Jue's favorite students, she has received much training in the realm of kung fu theory. So she began to ask loudly, "Master, although there are many variations in this front/reverse formation, it still does not deviate from the principle of Tai Chi dividing into Yin and Yang. In my opinion, the most important part of their formation lies with the positioning of their feet." She said this in a clear, crisp voice; even Zhang Wuji could hear her in the middle of the fight. He turned his head, seeing that its Zhou ZhiRuo talking, and immediately thought, "Why is she speaking so loudly? Is she trying to help me?"

Mie Jue said, "You're very observant to have figured out the intricacies of their formation." Zhou ZhiRuo started to talk to herself, "Yang divides up into Tai Yang, Shao Yang, Yin divides into Tai Yin, Shao Yin, Tai Yang is split into Gan and

Dui, Shao Yin is split into Li and Zhen, Shao Yang is split into Xun and Kan, Tai Yin is split into Gen and Kun. Gan is south, Kun is north, Li is east, Kan is west, Zhen is northeast, Dui is southeast, Xun is southwest, Gen is northwest. From Zhen to Gan we have the front side, from Xun to Kun is the reverse side.” Then she said to Mie Jue, “Master, just as you said: Heaven and Earth determines the location, the wind flows in between the mountains, thunder and wind complements, water and fire cancels, forming the eight divine positions. Numbers are forward, while knowledge goes backward. Kun Lun’s sword art is forward, so they obviously go from the Zhen position to the Gan position. The Hua Shan Saber art is reverse, so they obviously go from Xun to Kun. Right, master?” Mie Jue was delighted to hear her disciple point out the intricacies of the sword formation, nodded, and said, “Good girl. These years of teachings were not wasted on you.” She almost never gives praises, so these words are the biggest compliments she’ll ever make. But she did not notice that Zhou ZhiRuo’s voice was way too loud. After all, why did she need to speak up when talking to someone besides her? However, others around them did notice. Zhou ZhiRuo saw many eyes looking at her, so she simply pretended to be naïve and happy, clapping her hand saying, “Master. That’s right, that’s right! We E Mei sect’s Four Shape Circular Position encapsulates a square, combining Ying and Yang, with Yang outside the circle, and Yin inside the square, Circle symbolizes movement of heaven, while square symbolizes the stillness of the earth, seemingly even superior than theirs.” Mie Jue had always been arrogant, feeling that her E Mei Four Shape Fist is one of the best kung fu in the world. So these words really made her happy. With a smile, she said, “Although in theory this is true. But in practice, it still depends on the user’s knowledge.”

Zhang Wuji had learned some basic things about the Book of Changes when he was young. After Xiao Zhao’s help, he

then figured out the Wu Wan Position. Now with Zhou ZhiRuo's help, he realized the pattern behind the movements of the opponents. In an instant, he figured out many different ways to attack them. Each way would guarantee success.

Yet he thought again, "But should I do this right now? Mie Jue would probably blame Ms. Zhou if it seems that she has helped me. Mie Jue is very cruel, and might do terrible things to her. I can't possibly let her suffer because of me." So he continued to go on like before, not changing his fighting style, while examining the moves of his opponents. With Zhou ZhiRuo telling him the basics, the rest became easy for him.

But when Zhou ZhiRuo could not see any improvement, she became frustrated, and thought, "He's concentrating on his enemies, so how can he digest all the information I told him?" She again began to speak loudly again, "Master, I bet Mr. Iron Zither will next move to the Gui Mei position, right?" Before Mie Jue could reply, Ban ShuXian yelled, "Little girl from E Mei, who the hell is this kid to you? Why are you helping him? You know, it's not a good idea to mess with Kun Lun sect."

Zhou ZhiRuo's face immediately turned red, as Mie Jue yelled, "ZhiRuo, stop talking. It's not a good idea to mess with Kun Lun sect." Her tone made it obvious that she's protecting her student instead of scolding her. Zhang Wuji felt much warmth in his heart, thinking that if he kept on fighting like this, Zhou ZhiRuo would likely try other methods to help him. He started to laugh loudly and said, "I've already lost to E Mei, even got captured by Master Mie Jue. E Mei is certainly much better than you Kun Lun." He stepped left two steps and shot out his plum branch at the short old man. His timing and accuracy are just perfect,

following the concepts in the Book of Changes. The short old man felt a strong chi pushing from behind, and unwillingly changed his direction, instead aiming his saber towards Ban ShuXian. Ban ShuXian quickly tried to change her stance to block the attack. But at this time, she saw the tall old man coming to attack her. He TaiChong quickly came to the rescue, blocking the tall old man's saber. At this time, Zhang Wuji's palm shot out again, this time directing the short old man's saber towards He TaiChong. Deeply angered, Ban ShuXian quickly attacked the short old man with three sword strokes, causing him to back off and yell, "Don't fall into this little kid's trap!" He TaiChong realized this, and turned around to attack Zhang Wuji again. But with Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, Zhang Wuji turned him back the other way again, his sword cutting the side of the tall old man's arm. Screaming in pain, the tall old man counterattacked with his saber. The short old man screamed, "Brother, don't lose your temper. It's all because of that little kid, ouch..." Because Zhang Wuji had just turned away the sword of Ban ShuXian, prompting it to slash the back of the short old man. In an instant, both of the Hua Shan elders became hurt. The onlookers are gasped, not knowing what's going on. They only see that simply by using his palm and a branch, Zhang Wuji could divert all attacks towards him onto someone else. After some more rounds, they saw the He couple's sword and the two old men's sabers collide numerous times. Everyone sees what's happening, but no one knows how he's doing it. Only Yang Xiao, who knows some rudimentary Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, can understand some of theory. But even he wouldn't believe that Zhang Wuji actually knows Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi.

Ban ShuXian started giving out orders, trying to change their positions a bit, but Zhang Wuji had covered all eight positions, so that no matter what they do, their weapons still ended up pointing towards themselves. After a while, Ban ShuXian threw away her sword and began attacking with her

fists. The short old man saw this and thought, "Good idea. This kid knows some strange stuff, but he can't divert our weapons if we don't use any." He followed by throwing away his saber. But as he did this, he saw Zhang Wuji diverting He TaiChong to him. Ban ShuXian yelled, "Get rid of your sword!" He TaiChong immediately changed his form, throwing back his sword in the process. The tall old man also released his grip on his saber, but just as he did so, he found something in his hand again. For Zhang Wuji had simply returned his saber to him. The tall old man yelled, "I don't want it." And threw it behind him. Yet Zhang Wuji once again grabbed the saber, and once again returned it to him. This repeated numerous times before the tall old man simply gave up, and began to laugh. At this time, the other three people kept attacking Zhang Wuji with bare fists. Being some of the best fighters in their sects, their bare-handed fighting techniques are also quite formidable. But no matter how much they try, they just could not touch Zhang Wuji, who escaped their attacks over and over.

At this point, the four of them realizes that they're not going to win, and started to wonder about how they should retreat. The tall old man suddenly yelled, "Stupid kid, watch out for my hidden weapon!" A spit came out of his mouth aiming towards Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji turned sideways to dodge it, while the tall old man sneaked in from the other side; his saber came at Zhang Wuji. But he then had to quickly withdraw his saber midway as Zhang Wuji pushed Ban ShuXian in the way, who incidentally caught the spit in her face.

Ban ShuXian, deeply angered, tried to grab Zhang Wuji. The short old man waited behind to block off his escape. Both the tall old man and He TaiChong also attacked from other directions, thinking that this is time they'll finally get this kid. But then Zhang Wuji utilized his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi,

both feet left the ground quickly and flipped smoothly in midair, landing far away. Only to see the four Hua Shan and Kun Lun experts ram into each other, before falling back and landing on the ground.

The tall old man got up and said, "Hey, little twerp, this isn't fighting. You're using witchcraft. What kind of hero does that?" The short old man realized that the longer they stay up here, the more embarrassing things will get, so he bowed to Zhang Wuji and said, "Your kung fu is incredible. I've never seen anything like it in my life. We admit defeat." Zhang Wuji also bowed back and said, "Actually, if the elders hadn't gone easy on me earlier, I would've already died under your sword formation." This is actually somewhat true, for Zhang Wuji would've never won without Zhou ZhiRuo's pointers. But the 'gone easy on me' was his own addition, in order to placate his opponents. The tall old man said, "Really? So you at least know that you didn't win very righteously." Zhang Wuji asked, "May I ask for your names?" The tall old man said, "My martial brother is Wei Zhen..." The short old man cut in, "Oh, shut up!" Then to Zhang Wuji, "We're just losers. What's the point to give our names?" As he said this, he returned to the Hua Shan group. The tall old man said, "What's the problem with losing? Why so worrisome?" and followed back. Zhang Wuji walked up to XianYu Tong, sealed two of his pressure points, and said, "Once today's events are over, I'll give you the antidote."

Suddenly, he felt a breeze in the back. In his shock, Zhang Wuji reflexively flew up, only to hear two very low sounds passing under him. As he twisted back, he saw Ban ShuXian and He TaiChong's swords stabbing into XianYu Tong's chest. This is a special Kun Lun technique, called 'No Sound No Form', used for night battles. Of course, it's also perfect for sneak attacks in the daytime. Unfortunately, they did not know that Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Shen Gong automatically

alarms Zhang Wuji of back attack, allowing him to get out of the way in time. After their miss, the He couple's thoughts were, "If we don't kill him today, how can we still have the face to live?" They turned around and attacked again, using only offensive moves, disregarding their own safety. After Zhang Wuji dodged a few attacks, he began to wonder just how to stop this couple. Then suddenly, he got an idea. He quickly reached down on the ground and grabbed some mud, rolling it into two balls. Then he went over to XianYu Tong and pretended to reach into his pocket. When the He couple caught up, he quickly turned around and applied a huge amount of chi to their chests, forcing both to open their mouths to breathe. In this instant, Zhang Wuji shot the mud balls into their mouths, and said, "This is Master XianYu's golden bug poison. If it hasn't already dissolved, you just might be able to force it back out with your inner power." He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian quickly sat down and began to gather their chi. But by that time, they realize that it's too late. The pill has already dissolved.

Just as the couple is wondering what they should do, Zhang Wuji said, "Don't worry. It won't take affect within twelve hours. Once I'm done here, I'll cure your poison. Just make sure you don't try to give me poisoned wine in the future." The He couple thanked him happily, even ignored his little sly remark.

At this time, Mie Jue came out from the crowd and said to Song YuanQiao, "Hero Song, looks like it's down to just us now. We E Mei sect are mainly females, so I leave the decision to you." Song YuanQiao said, "I have already matched palms with Master Yin, but could not win. Your swordsmanship is unparalleled. I'm sure you can beat this youngster." Mie Jue let out a cold laugh, pulled out the Heaven sword, and entered the arena. Wu Dang's Yu LianZhou had been watching Zhang Wuji carefully. He

realizes that although Mie Jue's swordsmanship is excellent, it's probably not likely any better than the combined forces of four Hua Shan and Kun Lun. Should she lose also, and for some reason Wu Dang also can't handle this kid, then this whole trip would be a total waste. So he stepped up and said, "Master Mie Jue, let us five brothers first try him out first. Then you can surely win." His intentions are clear. Wu Dang concentrates heavily on inner power. After matching inner power with five Wu Dang experts, Zhang Wuji can't possibly have any strength left to handle Mie Jue's sword.

Mie Jue realizes Yu LianZhou's meaning, but thought, "Why do we need your help? Besides, what's the honor in winning that way?" She has always been arrogant. Even though she saw Zhang Wuji defeat so many experts, she just figured that these people are useless fools. After all, wasn't she the one who captured him in the first place? Although he showed amazing inner power by absorbing her three palm strikes, but so what? With that in mind, Mie Jue said, "Please go back, Second Hero Yu. Once my Heaven Sword comes out, I cannot casually put it back in its sheath."

Upon hearing this, Yu LianZhou said "Yes" and retreated. Mie Jue held up her sword, pointing at Zhang Wuji. Countless Ming sect members had died under this Heaven sword. Many began murmur. Mie Jue gave a cold laugh, said, "What are you yapping about? After I finish off this kid, it will be your turn. Afraid that you won't die fast enough?" Yin TianZheng knows the sharpness of the Heaven sword, and asked, "Young Hero Zeng, which weapon would you use?" Zhang Wuji said, "Elder Yin, I don't have any weapons. How about you decide which one I should use."

Yin TianZheng took out a sword from his side, said, "I'll give you this White Rainbow Sword. Although it's not nearly as good as the Heaven Sword, it's still very powerful." As he

said this, he gave the sword to Zhang Wuji, who said, "Thank you, Elder Yin." Yin TianZheng said, "I have had this sword for many years, but have never used it. Humph, what's so heroic about winning due to a superior weapon? Today I'll die peacefully knowing this sword will draw the blood of this old nun." Zhang Wuji thought, "But I can't harm Mie Jue." He held up the White Rainbow Sword and turned around. Then said to Mie Jue, "My sword skills are very mediocre, and certainly not on par with yours. Why don't we just call a truce, and you let these people go?" Mie Jue said coldly, "You have to win my sword before making any requests." The Ming sect members began to yell, "Old hag, if you're really that good you should fight him with your bare hands." "What's so great about your swordsmanship? It's just the sword that's good." "Why don't you try using a regular sword? Then if you can survive three of Hero Zeng's moves, we'll consider you good." "Three moves? She can't even survive one!" Mie Jue simply ignored these remarks, yelling at Zhang Wuji, "Go ahead!"

Zhang Wuji has never learnt any sword techniques before, so he's lost at what to do. Suddenly, he remembered He TaiChong's sword techniques just a while back, and emulated him as he attacked. Mie Jue yelled, "Kun Lun's 'Mountain Cliff Breaking Cloud'!" The Heaven Sword also moved, but rather than blocking, it ignored Zhang Wuji's attack, aiming straight for the Zhang Wuji's vital points instead. This attack carried an unimaginable power which quickly bared down on Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji quickly got out of the way, faltering a bit and started to roll on the floor. Just as he was getting back up, he felt a powerful wind coming from behind. With a quick spring of the right foot, Zhang Wuji's body shot up vertically with great speed, getting out of the way. This was an escape no one had thought possible, just as the crowd was about to cheer, they see Mie Jue change her direction midway, and renewed her

attack upwards. Before he could land, the sword light had blocked off his path downward. Zhang Wuji can't change directions in midair, unable to escape. Under the sweep of the Heaven Sword, he nearly lost both of his legs. But at the critical juncture, he was able to turn his body and the pointed the White Rainbow Sword down, its tip meeting the tip of the Heaven Sword. Only to see the White Rainbow Sword bend a bit, before Zhang Wuji utilized the bounce to shoot back up.

Mie Jue would no let up, attacking three more times at Zhang Wuji. While in midair, Zhang Wuji can only block with his sword. 'Ding' the White Rainbow Sword broke. Zhang Wuji then shot out with his palm at Mie Jue's head. Mie Jue countered by trying to cut off the oncoming palm with her sword. But Zhang Wuji saw this perfectly, and flicked the Heaven Sword on its side while he backed off, landing on the ground a few yards out. Mie Jue felt a strong vibration coming from the sword, almost causing her to drop the sword. Only to see Zhang Wuji standing there blankly, holding his broken sword. This sequence of events really was beyond belief. In a few short moments, Mie Jue had unleashed eight attacks, each deadly accurate. Yet each dissipated before Zhang Wuji, who escaped near-death after each blow. The attacks were delicate and fine; the escapes were quick and clever. The spectators' hearts almost flew out from all the action. No one had ever seen anything like it. Attacking like gods in Heaven, while evading like ghosts in Hell. Just as lightning and thunder, even when over, they can still send chills down one's spine.

During the eight blows, Zhang Wuji was basically getting killed, while Mie Jue held all the initiative. But Zhang Wuji's flick at the last moment temporarily froze Mie Jue. Had he taken the opportunity to immediately strike, he would've won the battle by now. Unfortunately, Zhang Wuji lacked the

battle experience to realize this. However, Mie Jue understands the situation, so she said, "Get another weapon. Then we'll fight again." Zhang Wuji thought, "I broke my grandfather's precious sword in just a few moves. What other weapon can possibly block the Heaven Sword?" As he's pondering, Zhou Dian* said, "I have a very good saber. Go ahead and use it." Zhang Wuji said, "The Heaven Sword is way too powerful. I'm afraid of breaking your saber." Zhou Dian said, "Who cares? If you lose, we're all going to die anyway. What's the point of saving a weapon?" Zhang Wuji nodded in his mind, and went over to grab the saber. As he did this, Yang Xiao whispered, "Mr. Zhang, be aggressive. Don't let her take the initiative." Zhang Wuji froze a bit when he heard Yang Xiao call him 'Mr. Zhang'. But then realized that since Yang BuHui knows his identity, she obviously told this to her dad. Wei YiXiao also whispered, "Take advantage of your lightness kung fu. DO NOT slow down even for a moment." Zhang Wuji, happy to have received such great pointers, said, "Thank you for your advice." Had they not been injured, Wei YiXiao and Yang Xiao on par with Mie Jue in terms of kung fu. So they have no problems pointing out the best tactics against the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji took the saber and went back into the arena. He then said, "Master Mie Jue, I'm coming!" Immediately, Zhang Wuji utilized his lightness kung fu to get behind Mie Jue, before she can turn around, he quickly attacked twice.

Mie Jue dodged the blows, but when she tried to counter, she couldn't find Zhang Wuji. Even before he learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, Zhang Wuji's lightness kung fu was superior to Mie Jue's. Now the difference is night and day. The crowd sees him stepping left, then stepping right, quick as lightning, practically spin circles around Mie Jue. Even Wei YiXiao can't help but be in awe. Yet no matter how fast he is, Zhang Wuji still had to keep a certain distance from Mie Jue,

not wanting to come in contact with the power of the Heaven Sword. Plus, he's hardly skilled at using weapons. So despite the obvious advantage, Zhang Wuji still could not win after several moves.

E Mei's disciples all realize that should this fight continue, their master would surely lose. Jing Xuan yelled, "Today we're here to root out the devil sect, not to compete in the kung fu. Let's all go up trap him, so that he can't keep playing hide-and-seek with our master." As she spoke, her sword came out. The E Mei disciples all rushed forward, circling around to surround Zhang Wuji and Mie Jue. Ding Minjun said to Zhou ZhiRuo coldly, "Sister Zhou, it's your choice whether you want to go up there or not." Zhou ZhiRuo, her face blushing, said angrily, "What's that comment for?"

At this moment, Zhang Wuji appeared in front of Ding Minjun. With a quick wave of his hand, he grabbed her sword and in a fluent motion sent it towards Mie Jue. Mie Jue quickly waved her sword to block the flying sword. But while breaking Ding Minjun's sword in two, her hand vibrated intensely due to the sheer force of Zhang Wuji's throw. Before Mie Jue could recover, more swords came at her, as Zhang Wuji kept grabbing and throwing her disciples' swords. Although only the best disciples followed Mie Jue on this trip, they still could not do anything while Zhang Wuji take their weapons.

After cutting down a few swords, Mie Jue felt extreme pain on her right arm. So she switched over to her left hand. Her swordsmanship is the same no matter which hand she uses. Only to see broken sword pieces dance in the air, as onlookers step back to avoid the shards. In just a few moments, all the E Mei disciples become empty-handed, with Zhou ZhiRuo being the lone exception.

Still thankful of her advice earlier, Zhang Wuji did not even try to approach her. But as a result, it made things worse by singling her out. Zhou ZhiRuo thought this might happen, so she was one of the first to attack. But Zhang Wuji's speed is simply way too fast for her. Besides, he purposely avoided her, preventing her from giving up her sword. Ding MinJun said in a cold voice, "Sister Zhou, he really does treat you differently." By this time, Zhang Wuji went back to concentrating on fighting Mie Jue, each sword stroke aiming directly at her vital points. Mie Jue, who while trying to dodge and block the oncoming assault, heard Ding MinJun's words clearly. She suddenly thought, "Why doesn't this kid take ZhiRuo's sword too? Could there really be something between them? I need to test this." So she immediately yelled, "ZhiRuo! Are you going against your master?" As she spoke, her sword quickly shot towards Zhou ZhiRuo's chest.

Zhou ZhiRuo didn't dare to raise her sword to block, and could only yell in shock, "Master, I..." When she said to here, Mie Jue's sword is nearly at her chest. Zhang Wuji does not know that Mie Jue was simply testing them. After having witnessed her personally kill Ji XiaoFu, Zhang Wuji could only assume the worst. So without thinking, he raced ahead of Mie Jue, picked up Zhou ZhiRuo by her waist, and flew several yards away.

Finally getting back the initiative, Mie Jue quickly turned her attention towards Zhang Wuji. Despite his amazing inner power, Zhang Wuji hasn't really learnt any lightness kung fu techniques. So he can't be like Wei YiXiao, keeping his speed even while carrying a person. Zhang Wuji felt a strong wind from behind, turned around and blocked with his saber. 'Dang' the saber broke as it crossed path with the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji quickly threw out the remaining half a saber at Mie Jue, hoping to slow her down a bit. This throw

utilized ninety percent of his powers, forcing Mie Jue to lower her head and dodge it. As the saber flew right over her head, Mie Jue felt a tinge of pain from the accompanying wind, temporarily paralyzing her. Zhang Wuji sees this chance, and quickly stepped up towards her, his palm shot out, and in a fluent motion snatched the Heaven Sword from her hand.

The wrist power involved in this sword-taking method had the backing of the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. Although her kung fu is high, Mie Jue still could not block such a powerful and accurate palm move. Zhang Wuji, even in triumph, did not let down his guard, pointing the Heaven Sword at Mie Jue's throat. Then he stepped back a few steps slowly, when suddenly Zhou ZhiRuo struggled against his hold, yelling, "Let me go!" Zhang Wuji said in shock, "Oh! Forgot!" His face pure red as she let her go, only to smell a faint flowery scent as her headband went by his nose. Zhang Wuji couldn't help but take a look at her, only to see her face a bit pale, looking very bashful. Although she tried to look mad, he could see in her eyes extreme joy and happiness. Mie Jue straightened herself. In silence, she looked at Zhou ZhiRuo, then at Zhang Wuji, her face whiter and whiter.

Zhang Wuji turned the sword around and said to Zhou ZhiRuo, "Ms. Zhou, please return this sword to your master." Zhou ZhiRuo looked at Mie Jue and saw her incredible anger. Thousands of thoughts entered her mind at that moment, "In this situation, with the way Mr. Zhang treats me, master must think that he and I are lovers. She'll surely throw me out of E Mei. What will I do? Although Mr. Zhang has treated me incredibly well, I never did plan on helping him fight against my own sect." Suddenly she heard Mie Jue bark out, "ZhiRuo! Kill him!"

Back when Zhang SanFeng took Zhou ZhiRuo back to Wu

Dang Mountain, he felt that it was awkward for her to stay there, since Wu Dang has no female disciples. So he took her to the E Mei sect. Zhou ZhiRuo is naturally intelligent. Plus, with her parents both dead, she concentrated solely on kung fu, and improved quickly, becoming one of Mie Jue's favorite disciple. For the past seven years, the words of Mie Jue are like Holy Scriptures to her. She has never harbored any thoughts of defiance. So when she heard her master telling her to kill Zhang Wuji, she did not even have to think. Taking the sword from Zhang Wuji's hand, and in one smooth motion quickly stabbing him. Zhang Wuji, never dreamed that she would possibly hurt him, did not make any attempt to dodge. In an instant, the sword has moved next to his chest. By the time he regained his senses, Zhang Wuji made a last second effort to get out of the way. But it was already too late. Zhou ZhiRuo only felt numbness in her wrist, thinking, "Am I really going to kill him?" In a state of semi-consciousness, she penetrated the sword through Zhang Wuji's right side of the chest. Zhou ZhiRuo let out a scream, pulling out the sword, only to see red blood gushing out of Zhang Wuji's chest, prompting everyone to gasp. Zhang Wuji blocked the wound with his hand, his body shaking, his face a strange expression, as if asking, "You really want to kill me?" Zhou ZhiRuo said, "I... I..." She wants to go over and check on him, but was too afraid, so instead she quickly turned around and ran out of the arena.

No one thought that her strike would succeed. Xiao Zhao's face turned white, rushed forward to hold up Zhang Wuji, yelling, "You... you..." Zhang Wuji said to Xiao Zhao, "Why... why do you want to kill me..." Luckily, the sword was a bit off to the side, and didn't penetrate Zhang Wuji's heart. But it did skim his lungs. When he finished talking, he began to have trouble breathing, and started cough loudly. In his condition, Zhang Wuji can't tell the difference between Xiao Zhao and Zhou ZhiRuo. Blood kept spilling out, turning Xiao

Zhao's clothing pure red. Every member of the audience, whether they are the Ming sect, Heavenly Eagle sect, or the six major sects, all became quiet. Everyone was moved deeply by the amazing kung fu and compassion Zhang Wuji showed during his bouts. When they saw the Heaven Sword penetrating his chest, all wondered whether this is a fatal blow or not. Xiao Zhao carefully put Zhang Wuji down on the ground, then yelled, "Who has the best medicine for wounds?" Shaolin's Kong Sheng quickly stepped up and took out a bottle from his robe, said, "This is Shaolin's best medicine for treating external wounds." He immediately opened Zhang Wuji's shirt and quickly applied the medicine on the deep cut. But unfortunately, the wound is too deep and blood kept spilling out. Kong Sheng muttered impatiently, "What should I do? What should I do?" The He couple also became agitated, thinking that if Zhang Wuji died, then they would die too. He TaiChong quickly walked over to Zhang Wuji's side and asked, "Can you tell me how to cure this poison?" Xiao Zhao yelled at him while crying, "Get out of here! If Young Master Zhang can't live, then everyone dies with him." He TaiChong ignored her and kept asking, "How do I cure the golden bug poison?" Kong Sheng said angrily, "If you don't leave now, I won't be held responsible for my actions." At this moment, Zhang Wuji regained a bit of consciousness, opened his eyes. He immediately sealed seven pressure points around the wound, greatly decreasing the blood spillage. Kong Sheng quickly applied more medicine to block the rest of the blood, while Xiao Zhao tore up some of her clothing to wrap him up. When she saw just how pale he looks, her mind became filled with unspeakable agitation and fright. After a while, Zhang Wuji regained his senses. His only thought was, "As long as I'm alive, I can't let the six major sects destroy the Ming sect." With that in mind, he and got up and said, "Is there anyone else from E Mei or Wu Dang who wants to challenge me?"

Mie Jue said, "E Mei has already lost today. If you don't die, we'll settle this later. Let's see what's Wu Dang can do now!" With Kong Dong, Shaolin, Kun Lun, Hua Shan, and E Mei all losing, Wu Dang is the only sect left who can challenge this youngster. Considering his injury, even second-rate fighters should have no problems with him. Any of the five Wu Dang heroes can easily beat him. Yet Wu Dang is famous for their 'Righteousness'. How can they fight such a wounded person? However, if Wu Dang won't challenge him, then won't this whole attack be in vain? Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, Yin LiTing, and Muo ShengGu all looked at each other. No one can think of a good plan. Suddenly, they heard Song QingShu yell, "Dad, martial uncles, let me fight him." The five Wu Dang heroes realizes his intentions. Song QingShu is one generation lower, so he's much more appropriate for such a battle.

Yu LianZhou said, "No! It won't make much of a difference if you go instead of us." Zhang SongXi said, "Second brother, in my opinion, we should worry about the whole picture." Muo ShengGu said, "Reputations aren't really important. But to do such thing to such an injured youngster..." Not knowing what to do, they all looked at Song YuanQiao, deferring to him. Song YuanQiao saw Yin LiTing standing quietly on the side, knows that his fiancé lost her virginity and subsequently her life to Yang Xiao. He said, "If we don't destroy the Devil sect today, they'll only cause more suffering in the world. So we have no choice. QingShu, be careful."

Song QingShu bowed and said, "Yes." He walked over to Zhang Wuji and yelled, "Young Hero Zeng, if you aren't a member of the Ming sect, you can leave now. The six major sects are just here to destroy the Ming sect."

Zhang Wuji said, "Thank you for your kindness. But... I have decided to live and die with the Ming sect!" People from the Ming and Heavenly Eagle sect all began to yell, "Young Hero Zeng. We shall forever remember your incredible kindness today. At this point, you really don't need to keep fighting us." Yin TianZheng got up and said, "Mr. Song, let me try out your powerful Wu Dang kung fu." But just as he got up, he immediately felt numbness in his legs, and had to sit back down again. Song QingShu said, "In that case, I have no choice but to fight you. I'm sorry." Xiao Zhao quickly shielded in front of Zhang Wuji, and yelled, "Then you have to kill me first." Zhang Wuji said quietly, "Xiao Zhao, don't worry. He can't kill me." Xiao Zhao said, "But... but you're injured." Zhang Wuji said tenderly, "Xiao Zhao, why are you so kind to me?" Xiao Zhao said, "Because... because you're kind to me." Zhang Wuji stared at her for a moment and thought, "Even if I die today, at least I have a true friend who's good to me." Song QingShu yelled at Xiao Zhao, "Get out of here!" Zhang Wuji said, "Why are you so rude to this little girl?" Song QingShu grabbed Xiao Zhao's head and pushed her away, then said, "Devilish couple, how disgusting. Get up so we can fight!" Zhang Wuji said, "I heard that your father is a very honorable and righteous man. Yet you are so bullish. You're not worthy of me fighting standing up." In reality, he can't fight standing-up even if he wants to.

Yu LianZhou said, "QingShu. Simply seal his pressure point. Don't hurt him." Song QingShu responded, "Yes." Then he shot out his right hand aiming for Zhang Wuji's pressure point. Zhang Wuji didn't move, letting him hit his own 'Jian Zhen Point'. At the same moment, he gathered his inner power, pushing the fingers back out. It's almost as if Song QingShu just pointed his fingers at a pond of water, showing no effect. After gathering himself, his right foot flew out, heading towards Zhang Wuji's chest. This kick utilized much

of his energy. Although Yu LianZhou told him not to hurt this youngster, for some reason, he feels much hatred towards this youngster. This really isn't because he has an ill temper, but rather because of the caring and affectionate look on Zhou ZhiRuo's face for this youngster. Although she did stab him in the end, one can easily see the tremendous pain on her face while doing so.

After he saw Zhou ZhiRuo, Song QingShu's eyes rarely moved too far away from her. Although he couldn't watch her directly all the time, none of her expressions and actions escaped his vision. He thought, "After this stab, whether this youngster lives or dies, he will forever be entrenched in her heart." If he kills this youngster, Zhou ZhiRuo would certainly hate him. But how can he possibly pass up this only chance of killing him? Only to see Zhang Wuji's fingers calmly pushing the feet out of the way, causing it to slide harmlessly to the side. Song QingShu immediately regained his footing, and then kicked back with his left foot, once again diverted by Zhang Wuji's fingers.

After three exchanges, no one expected this kind of result. Song YuanQiao yelled, "QingShu, he has no strength left in his body. He's using your force against you."

Song QingShu immediately changed his tactics after hearing his dad's pointer. His strokes became soft and light, sometimes seemingly lack any sort of power. This is Wu Dang's 'Soft Palm'. The idea of redirecting the enemy's attacks is the basis for Wu Dang kung fu, and the 'Soft Palm' is the epitome of this sort of fighting style. However, there is still a limit to its softness, while Zhang Wuji has already mastered all seven levels of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. With his left hand holding the wound, Zhang Wuji blocked all attacks with his right hand, moving up and down in different rhythms as if playing a zither. Even after he finished using

all thirty-six moves of Soft Palms, Song QingShu still could not touch this youngster.

While in frustration, Song QingShu accidentally saw Zhou ZhiRuo, only to see her face filled with concern, causing him to feel even angrier, because the concern is not for him. After taking a deep breath, Song QingShu's left aimed towards Zhang Wuji's right cheek, while his right palm aimed straight for Zhang Wuji's 'Que Pan Point'. This move is called 'Flower Blooms Giving Fruit'. Although the name is pretty, the move is deadly. Two hands move at the same time with blazing speed, yet each hand attacks in a different way, combining two attacks in one. Song QingShu attacked with the force of a tornado and the speed of lightning, prompting the audience to gasp. Only to see his left hand hit his own right cheek, his right hand sealing his own 'Que Pan Point', as Zhang Wuji diverted both of his attacks back at him with Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. Feeling a sharp pain on his Que Pan Point, Song QingShu fell back, struggled on the ground, unable to get back up. Song YuanQiao immediately went up and quickly unsealed his pressure point.

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji opened his mouth, and big gulps of blood spilled out. Everyone looked at him with concern, thinking, "Although he fought off Song QingShu, he has used up all his remaining energy." They then looked over at the Wu Dang sect, wondering if they will send someone else or give up. Song YuanQiao said, "Wu Dang has done all it can today. The devil sect must be fated to live on. That's why a strange youngster appeared today to save them from destruction. How can we still be righteous if we still keep on fighting?" Yu LianZhou said, "Big brother is correct. We'll go back and seek the advice of our master. When this youngster has recovered from his injuries, Wu Dang will come back and challenge him again." Zhang SongXi and Muo ShengGu both then added, "Second brother is correct."

Suddenly, Yin LiTing stepped into the arena; his sword pointing at Zhang Wuji, yelling, "Mr. Zeng, I have no ill feelings towards you. So I won't kill you. But Yang Xiao is my biggest sworn enemy. I must kill him!" Zhang Wuji shook his head, saying, "As long as I'm alive, I won't let you kill anyone in the Ming sect." Yin LiTing said, "In that case, I will kill you!"

Zhang Wuji coughed up another gulp of blood. His head half-conscious, his heart serene, and whispered, "Sixth Uncle Yin, then go ahead and kill me!" When Yin LiTing heard the words 'Sixth Uncle Yin', he thought, "Wuji always called me by this name when he was young. This youngster..." He looked closely at Zhang Wuji's face. The more he looked, the more this face look like the child he remembered from nine years ago. So he asked, "You... are you Wuji?"

With no more energy left knowing he's near death, Zhang Wuji felt no more need to hide his identity, and whispered, "Sixth Uncle Yin, I... I think of you... often." Tears poured down Yin LiTing's face. He let go of his sword, rushed forward, and held Zhang Wuji in his arms, yelling, "You're Wuji, you're my fifth brother's son Zhang Wuji." Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, and Muo ShengGu all immediately went up to Zhang Wuji upon hearing this, their face filled with extreme happiness. At this moment, nothing else in the world mattered to them.

With this yell, other than the He couple, Zhou ZhiRuo, Yang Xiao and a few others, everyone gasped. No one could believe that this youngster is actually Zhang CuiShan's son.

Yin LiTing sees that Zhang Wuji had already fainted, so he hurriedly took out a 'Heavenly Heart Protecting Pill' and put it in his mouth. After handing Zhang Wuji over to Yu LianZhou, he pulled out his sword, rushed in front of Yang

Xiao, and scolded, “Yang Xiao, you wicked bastard, I...I...” His throat became stuck, unable to keep yelling any further. The long sword shot out, aiming directly at Yang Xiao’s heart. Yang Xiao, unable to move, simply closed his eyes and smiled, waiting for his death. Suddenly, a young girl came from the side, blocking in front of Yang Xiao, yelling, “Don’t hurt my daddy!” Ying LiTing stopped. As he looks closely at this person, an “Ah” sound came out. His body turned cold as ice as he saw this girl. Tall and slender, eyes big and bright, she’s actually Ji XiaoFu! After Yin LiTing got engaged to Ji XiaoFu, he never could concentrate on practicing his kung fu, as his thoughts were always filled with images of his fiancé. When he later found out that Yang Xiao kidnapped her, raped her, and killed her, the pain in his heart could not be described in words. Now that she has appeared in front of him once again, he stumbled, and said with shock, “Sister XiaoFu, you... you haven’t...”

That young girl is of course Yang BuHui. She said, “My surname is Yang. Ji XiaoFu is my mom, she’s already dead.” Yin LiTing paused, then figured out what’s going on. He said, “Oh, you’re right. That was stupid of me! You should get out of the way. Today I’m here to seek revenge for your mother.”

Yang BuHui points to Mie Jue, “Fine. Uncle Yin, go kill this old nun then.” Yin LiTing asked, “W...Why?” Yang BuHui said, “Because my mom died under her palm.” Yin LiTing said, “Don’t be ridiculous! What does a child like you know?” Yang BuHui responded in a cold voice, “That day at the Butterfly Valley, old nun wanted my mom to come kill my dad. My mom refused, so the old nun killed her.” At the time of Ji XiaoFu’s death, Yang BuHui is still a little girl. So she obviously didn’t realize exactly what had happened. But as she grew up and recalled those events, she pieced everything together. Yin LiTing turned around and looked at Mie Jue, his face filled with puzzlement, asking, “Is... she...”

Ms. Ji really...”

Mie Jue responded in a crisp, loud voice, “She’s right. What use is there to let such a despicable student live? She and Yang Xiao loved each other. She would rather disobey me than to go kill him. Sixth Hero Yin, I only lied to save you some face. Humph, what’s the need to remember such a ****?” Yin LiTing’s face turned green, yelling, “I don’t believe you! I don’t believe you!” Mie Jue said, “Why don’t you ask this girl her name?” Yin LiTing turned towards Yang BuHui. Through his teary eyes he could only see Ji XiaoFu, but his ears heard clearly, “ My name is Yang BuHui*. My mom said that she never regretted what had happened.”

*Bu means ‘No’. Hui means ‘Regret’.

‘Dang’, Yin LiTing dropped his sword, turned around and ran down the mountain. Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou yelled, “Sixth brother, sixth brother!” But Yin LiTing did not respond. As he’s running, Yin LiTing suddenly tripped, but he quickly got back up and resumed running.

Everyone only felt sympathy as they watch Yin LiTing, for how could a person of his kung fu skills trip while running? The only reason would be if his mind is in a state of total disorder. At this time, Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, and Muo ShengGu all sat around Zhang Wuji, their palms pushing against four of Zhang Wuji’s major pressure points, trying to heal him with their inner power. Only to feel a great deal of energy in his body, sucking their strength into him at a rapid pace. If they keep this up, their inner powers would be totally gone in four hours. Yet with Zhang Wuji’s life hanging in the balance, they can’t release their palms. Suddenly, Zhang Wuji opened his eyes, and in an instant, Song YuanQiao and others felt their chi moving backwards, returning to them. Song YuanQiao yelled, “Don’t!

You need to rest.” The four brothers immediately released their palms, only to feel Zhang Wuji’s Jiu Yang chi rushing into their body, strengthening their inner powers. The four brothers couldn’t believe that even with his injury, Zhang Wuji can summon such great deal of inner power. Zhang Wuji said, “Eldest Uncle Song, Second Uncle Yu, Fourth Uncle Zhang, Seventh Uncle Muo, sorry about that. How is Martial Grandfather’s health?” Yu LianZhou said, “Master is doing well. Wuji, you... you’re so big...” Despite having thousands of words in his mind, no more words would come out. Only tears of joy flowed down their cheeks.

Delighted that that the youngster is his grandson, Yin TianZheng started to laugh out loud. But he could still could not muster the strength to get up.

Mie Jue waved her hands, as the E Mei disciples all followed her down the mountain. Zhou ZhiRuo followed her martial sisters slowly with her head down. After a few steps, she could not help but look back. Her gaze met that of Zhang Wuji’s, who was watching her leave. Zhou ZhiRuo’s face immediately turned red, her eyes seemingly saying, “I’m really sorry to have stabbed you so severely. Please take care of yourself.” Zhang Wuji seemingly realized her thoughts, and simply nodded. Zhou ZhiRuo’s face brightened up considerably, and with a big smile, left quickly with the rest of the E Mei sect.

Hua Shan and Kong Dong, taking their wounded, also followed down the mountain. He TaiChong came up to Zhang Wuji and said, “Little friend, congratulations on meeting your relatives...” Before he could continue, Zhang Wuji took out two common painkiller pills and said, “Here is the antidote.” He TaiChong took the pills, wondering if it really can cure his poison. Zhang Wuji added, “If I say it’s the antidote, then it really is the antidote.” Despite his low

voice, everyone can see how serious he is. Besides, even if he's lying, He TaiChong knows that he cannot force Zhang Wuji to do anything with the Wu Dang brothers around. He could only respond, "Thank you!" and swallowed the pill with Ban ShuXian. The Kun Lun sect then went down the mountain.

Yu LianZhou said, "Wuji, you cannot go down the mountain right now due to your injury, and we can't stay here either. But when you have time, please come to Wu Dang, if only so master can take a look at you." Zhang Wuji nodded with teary eyes. Although they have many questions, the Wu Dang brother did not ask any, for they do not want to further burden Zhang Wuji in his current state. Suddenly, they heard a Shaolin monk yelling, "Where's brother Yuan Zhen's body?" Muo ShengGu looked over at Shaolin's pile of bodies, and indeed could not see his body among the dead.

Yuan Yin yelled at the Ming sect, "Give us back brother Yuan Zhen's body!" Zhou Dian said with a smile, "Haha! Are you kidding me? If we don't even care to keep your live bodies, what the hell would we do with a dead one?" Shaolin realizes that he's right, and began searching around. But the body never showed up. They figured that some other sect must have taken it by mistake, and also began to head down the mountain. As Wu Dang sect started to leave, Zhang Wuji kowtowed to send them off. Song YuanQiao said, "Wuji, you are now the savior of the Ming sect. I hope you can guide them down the road of righteousness from now on." Zhang SongXi said, "Be careful. Make sure you guard against the sinister people." Zhang Wuji answered, "Yes."

When the six major sects all left, Yin TianZheng and Yang Xiao looked at each other, then said together, "Members of the Ming sect and the Heavenly Eagle sect express thanks to Hero Zhang for saving our lives!" In an instant, everyone got

on their knees and kowtowed on the ground. Zhang Wuji doesn't know what to do, seeing his elders and even his grandfather and uncle among the people bowing. He tried to return the bow, but reopened his wound while trying to do so, and fainted. Xiao Zhao quickly held him back up. Two uninjured Ming sect members came by with a stretcher, putting Zhang Wuji on it. Yang Xiao said, "Take him to my room and let him rest there."

Xiao Zhao followed Zhang Wuji as he's being taken away. As she walked by Yang BuHui, she heard Yang BuHui say coldly, "Xiao Zhao, you really are a great actress. I knew you were strange, but I never thought that an ugly girl like you is actually a great beauty." Xiao Zhao did not respond, only kept on walking. For the next few days, everyone on the Brightness Peak only focused on healing their wounds. After the last life-and-death battle, they all regretted the past years of inner turmoil. No one brought up any past differences, as everyone rested peacefully on Brightness Peak, healing their injuries.

(Continued by dgfds01)

Though Zhang Wuji's injuries were not light, Zhou Zhirou's sword had missed his heart and lungs by a few inches. With the aid of his completed Art of Nine Yang, after convalescing for seven or eight days, his wound gradually healed. Each day, Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bu De and others were carried into his room to visit him. They were very happy to see his condition improve day by day. After about eight days, Zhang Wuji could sit up. That night, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao visited him again. Zhang Wuji said: "You were both injured by the Xuan Yin Finger. How have you been feeling these last few days?" Both of them were suffering daily from cold, bone searing pain. Rather than getting better, the injuries had been getting worse. However, they did not want him to worry so they said: "There's been great improvement!" Zhang Wuji saw that

there was a shadow of black chi over their faces. Even their speech was weak and listless. He said: "My inner strenght is about sixty to seventy percent recovered. Let me try treating your injuries. " Yang Xiao hurriedly replied: "No, no! There's no need to rush. Hero Zhang should wait till you've completely recovered before treating us. How could we rest easy if you aggravate your injuries?" Wei Yixiao said: "A few days won't make a difference. The important thing is for Hero Zhang to rest and recover."

Zhang Wuji said: "My grandfather the Eagle King and my godfather the Lion King are from the same generation as you. You're both my seniors. I really cannot respond to you calling me 'hero'." Yang Xiao smiled and replied: "From now onwards we are your subordinates. We'll follow behind you and we won't even dare sit without your permission. How can we speak of being your seniors?" Zhang Wuji asked in surprise: "Uncle Yang, what do you mean?" Wei Yixiao said: "Hero Zhang, you're the only person worthy and capable of bearing the heavy burden of the Ming Cult Leader's position."

Zhang Wuji frantically waved both hands urgently saying: "That's impossible! That's Impossible!" At this instance, the sound of piercing whistles was heard from the east. This was Brightness Peak's warning signals. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao were shocked thinking: " Could it be that the six sects refused to admit defeat and are attacking again?" However, their facial expressions did not betray their thoughts. Yang Xiao said: "Was the ginseng you took yesterday good enough? Xiao Zhao, go get some more and prepare some more for Hero Zhang." Alarm whistles were now heard from the western and southern sides. Zhang Wuji said: "Are there enemies attacking?" Wei Yixiao said: "There's no lack of good fighters from our sect and the Heavenly Evil Sect. Hero Zhang, there's no need for you to worry. We can easily deal

with little bandits!" But just a moment later, the whistles could be heard from a lot nearer. The enemy was advancing very quickly, they were definitely more than mere bandits. Yang Xiao said: "I'll go out for a while to organise things. Brother Wei will stay here with Hero Zhang. Hehe, can it be that the Ming Cult is so easily pushed around?" Even though his injuries were so serious that he could not move, his speech was still heroic. Zhang Wuji pondered: "Shaolin and E-Mei are righteous sects. They will not break their word. The attackers are probably wicked, merciless people. All the top fighters on Brightness Peak are severely injured. In this last seven or eight days, not one has recovered. If they try to fight, they'll only be throwing their lives away in vain."

At that moment, urgent footsteps were heard outside the door. A man rushed in. His face was covered with blood and he had been stabbed in the chest with a knife. He yelled: "The enemies are attacking from three directionsthey're coming up the mountain.....our brothers fighting the enemy.....can't hold out....." Wei Yixiao asked: "Who are the enemies?" The man pointed outside and tried to reply. Instead, he fell face-down onto the ground, dying just like that. The whistling grew more incessant and frenzied, the danger of the situation was obvious. Suddenly, two more men rushed into the room. Yang Xiao saw that man in front was the deputy flag leader of the Flood Waters Flag. His whole body was covered with blood and his face as pale as death, but he still maintained his composure. Bowing slightly, he reported: "Hero Zhang, Left Emissary Yang, Protector King Wei, the people attacking us are from the Great Whale Clan, Sea Sand Sect, Divine Fist House." Yang Xiao frowned, hrmphed and said: "These little clowns even dare to attack us?" The Deputy Flag Leader replied: "The enemy is actually not very powerful. The problem is that most of our brothers are injured....." As he said this, the Five Wanderers - Leng Qian, the Iron Hat Priest Zhang Zhong,

Peng Yingyu, Shuo Bu De, Zhou Dian - were stretched in one by one. Zhou Dian yelled: "The Beggar's Clan, Three Family Clan and the Wushan Clan have taken the opportunity to attack us as well. As long as I, Zhou Dian, has a single breath left in my body I will never let it rest....." Before he finished, Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang limped in supported by crutches. Yin Tianzheng said: " Wuji my child, you just lie back and rest. Damm the Five Wind Sabre and Soul Breaking Spear sects! What can two little sects like this do to us?"

Among them, Yang Xiao was the highest ranking Ming Cult member, Yin Tianzheng was the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect while Peng Yingyu was the most resourceful. These three men had faced all sorts of calamities in their lives. Each time, they had managed to avert disaster with their abilities. But they could see no way out of the present situation - they were all severely injured with a large group of enemies at their doorstep. Even if the other clans and sects had not attacked, the Beggars Clan alone with its large numbers of able fighters would have been extremely difficult to deal with. By now, everyone secretly considered Zhang Wuji their sect leader. Together, they all turned to him hoping he had some plan to get them out of this predicament. During all this, all sorts of thoughts and ideas swirled through Zhang Wuji's mind. Though his kungfu was greater than Yang Xiao's, his grandfather, Wei Yixiao and the others, they were far ahead of him when it came to strategy and cunning. If they were unable to come up with a solution, there was no way he would be able to. He let out a groan. Suddenly, he thought of something and said: "Let's go hide in the secret tunnel. The enemy might not be able to find us. Even if they discovered the tunnel, they would have difficulty attacking down it." This was the best possible solution to him so he spoke excitedly. To his surprise, the others simply looked at each other. No one agreed with him. It was as if they all felt that it could not be done. Zhang Wuji said: "A true

man knows when to retreat and when to advance. Let's hide and recuperate first. When our injuries recover we'll come out and fight. There is no disgrace in that."

Yang Xiao said: "Hero Zhang's plan is brilliant." He turned to Xiao Zhao and said: "Xiao Zhao, help Hero Zhang into the secret tunnel." Zhang Wuji said: "Let's go together!" Yang Xiao said: "You go first, we'll follow later."

When he heard this, Zhang Wuji knew that they would not follow, it was just a ploy to get him to safety. He said clearly: "Seniors, though I'm not a member of your sect I have gone through dangers with you. It can be said I have a bond of life and death with you. How could I abandon you and cowardly hide away?"

Yang Xiao said: "There are some things Hero Zhang is unaware of. For generations, it has been a strict Ming Cult rule that apart from the sect leader, no Ming Cult member may enter the secret tunnel. The penalty for breaking the rule is death. Both you and Xiao Zhao are not Ming Cult members so you're exempted from the rule."

By now the sounds of fighting could be heard from all directions. The route up to Brightness Peak was steep and rugged. Many passes steel and rock gates blocking the way. Therefore, even though the Ming Cult's defenders were weak, the attackers had not had an easy time either. Added to that was the Ming Cult's awesome reputation - the attackers were cautious and did not dare rush forward. Nevertheless from the sounds of fighting, they were slowly making their way closer. Every now and then the screams were heard as exhausted Ming Cult defenders were slaughtered.

Zhang Wuji thought: "If we don't go now, within two hours the whole of Ming Cult will be killed." He immediately said:

"Can't we change the rule?" Yang Xiao shook his head darkly. Peng Yingyu suddenly said: "Everyone listen to me: Hero Zhang's kungfu is matchless and his character righteous. He's the great saviour of our sect. Let's set Hero Zhang up as our sect's thirty-fourth generation leader. If the leader orders our members to enter the secret tunnel, we'll be following his orders, not breaking the rule." Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao and the others had already intended to make Zhang Wuji the cult leader. Everyone agreed with Monk Peng's suggestion. Zhang Wuji anxiously waved his hand saying: "I'm very young and am neither noble nor capable. How could I dare shoulder such a heavy burden? Also, my grandteacher, Venerable Master Zhang, repeatedly told me never to enter the Ming Cult. I promised him I won't. I accept follow Reverend Peng's suggestion." Yin Tianzheng said: "I'm your grandfather and I order you to enter the Ming Cult. Even if your grandfather is not closer to you than your grandteacher, at the very least we are equal. My words cancels out his, it's like neither of us said anything. It's your own decision whether to enter the Ming Cult." Yin Yewang added: "Add your uncle to the equation as well - is that enough to tip the scales? It is said: to see a maternal uncle is to see mother. As your mother is no longer around, I take her place."

Zhang Wuji was saddened by his grandfather's and uncle's words. He said: "Sect Leader Yang left a will before he died. I brought it out with me from the secret tunnel. I had intended to give it to you once your injuries recovered. Sect Leader Yang's last wishes were that my godfather, the Golden Haired Lion King, temporarily assume the position of sect leader." Saying this, he drew out the will and handed it to Yang Xiao.

Peng Yingyu said: "Hero Zhang, a true man knows how to change plans according to the circumstances. The Golden

Haired Lion King is your godfather, relationship wise he's just like your natural father. It is only natural that a son succeeds his father. Since the Golden Haired Lion King is not here, please follow the wishes of Sect Leader Yang and become our temporary sect leader." Everyone said: "He is right." Zhang Wuji was wrecked with anxiety hearing the sound of fighting get closer and closer. For a moment he had no idea what to do. He thought: "The most important thing is to save all these people. I'll worry about the rest later." So he said clearly: "Since you all value me so, if I refuse I'll be a great sinner towards the Ming Cult. Junior Zhang Wuji will temporarily assume the office of sect leader. Once the dangers of today have passed, please elect someone more worthy." Everyone broke out cheering at his words. Despite the fact that powerful enemies were approaching and impending danger looming, great joy was seen on everyone's face. Since the untimely death of the late sect leader Yang Dingtian, the Ming Cult had no leader to hold them together. They had fought among themselves, killing each other and splitting the once powerful and influential sect up. Some members had left to set up their own organisations while others had descended into evil and wickedness, further worsening the situation. Now that a strong leader had surfaced, how could they not be affected? Those who were able to move fell to their knees. Though Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang were Zhang Wuji's grandfather and uncles respectively, they were no exception. Zhang Wuji quickly kowtowed back and said: "Everyone please rise. Left Emissary Yang, please pass my orders: every member of our sect is to retreat down the secret tunnel."

Yang Xiao replied: "Yes! Your orders will be carried out. I have a suggestion - we should order the Raging Fire Flag to block the enemy with fire and burn down all buildings on Brightness Peak. The enemy will then think we've run away. What do you think?" Zhang Wuji said: "Your scheme is

brilliant. Left Emissary Yang, please pass the orders." Inwardly he thought: "This was the same plan that Zhu Changling used years ago. It was actually a good tactic, unfortunately he used it to deceive me." Yang Xiao's orders were passed - cult members were ordered to retreat, the Flood Water and Raging Fire Flags were ordered to form the rearguard. As the Heavenly Eagle Sect were guests, their members entered the secret tunnel first. They were followed by the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates; the ranking officers of Brightness Peak; the Gold, Wood and Earth Flags; the Five Wanderers and Wei Yixiao. Shortly after Zhang Wuji and Yang Xiao entered the tunnel, the members of the Water Flag went in. By now, the flames were lighting up the eastern and western sky. The fire burned brighter and brighter. Then the Fire Flag sprayed oil onto the flames, causing the fires to erupt even further. Though the attackers were numerous, none of them dared to approach the flames. Instead, they surrounded Brightness Peak blocking off the escape routes. The Fire Flag members went down the tunnel and shut the entrance. Not long after, the building above collapsed, covering the entrance to the secret tunnel with burning debris.

The raging fire burned for two days and two nights. Brightness Peak was the headquarters of the Ming Cult with a heritage stretching back hundreds of years. Everything, from the main reception hall to ordinary buildings, was burnt to the ground. When the fire subsided, the attackers found the remains of Ming Cult followers killed in battle among the debris, their bodies burnt beyond recognition. They assumed that the Ming Cult had refused to surrender, preferring to die instead. They assumed that Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the rest had all lost their lives in the fire. The Heavenly Eagle Sect and Ming Cult used the map of the tunnels to divide the area up into living spaces. The tunnel was deep underground so they felt neither the heat of the flames nor

head a sound from above. They had brought enough foodstuffs and water in to last them for two months. Each member of the Ming Cult and the Heavenly Eagle Sect maintained a respectful silence. They were all aware that the secret tunnel was a forbidden, sacred place. It was only by the sect leader's grace that they were able to take refuge there. Therefore, no one dared to wander around at will.

Yang Xiao and the other leaders gathered around Yang Dingtian's remains and listened to Zhang Wuji's story on how he came across Yang Dingtian's will and learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. When he finished, he handed the kungfu manual over to Yang Xiao. Yang Xiao refused to accept it. He bowed and said: "The late Sect Leader Yang's will was clearly written: 'The Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual shall be given to Xie Xun for safe keeping. It shall then be passed on to the new sect leader.' It is more appropriate for you, as sect leader, to keep it." Everyone then turned to read Yang Dingtian's will. They sighed sadly when they finished, saying: "Sect Leader Yang was both brave and far-sighted. Yet it was his wife's infidelity caused him to suffer a fire deviaton and die. If only we had seen the will earlier, then we would not be in this situation today." Everyone thought of the tragic deaths of their comrades, they gritted their teeth in grief and cursed Cheng Kun. Yang Xiao said: "Though Cheng Kun was Mrs Yang's martial brother and the Golden Haired Lion King's master, we had never met him previously. But we have seen the result of his work. It turns out that for the last few decades, he has been trying to destroy our cult." Zhou Dian said: "Left Emissary Yang, Bat King Wei, you've both fallen into his trap, you can be considered supid." He had intended to attack Yin Tianzheng as well. However, he took Zhang Wuji's feelings into account and swallowed the words "White Browed Old Man". Yang Xiao's face turned red and he said: "At least heaven is just, that evil Cheng Kun died under Brother Yewang's palm." The

leader of the Fire Flag said with hatred: "With all his evil deeds, Cheng Kun got off easy to die like that." They discussed the matter a little while more before breaking up to sit down and treat their injuries. After seven or eight days in the secret tunnel, Zhang Wuji's sword wound was about ninety percent healed leaving a inch long scar. He began to treat the external wounds of the brothers. Though there was a huge shortage of medicines, he managed to heal everyone with his skills in acupuncture and acupressure. At first everyone only knew that their young sect leader's martial arts were unfathomable. They had never imagined that his medical skills were so amazing, that they even rivaled the skills of the "Divine Doctor of Butterfly Valley" Hu Qingniu.

After another few days, Zhang Wuji's wound was completely healed. He then used his Art of Nine Yang help Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the Five Wanderers force out the Xuan Yin Finger's cold poison. Within three days, they had completely recovered from their internal injuries and wanted to leave the secret tunnel and destroy the enemy. Zhang Wuji said: "You've just recovered from your injuries and your inner strength has not returned completely. Since you've already been patient for so long, waiting a few more days can't hurt." For the next few days, everyone worked hard preparing themselves. Those with mediocre kungfu sharpened sabres and swords and those with better kungfu practiced regulating their chi. The Ming Cult had suffered one humiliation after another since the six major sects besieged Brightness Peak. Now their frustration was boiling over, needing an outlet to be released.

One night, Yang Xiao explained the Ming Cult's creed, aim, and rules, their main power centres in different places, and the abilities and characters of their leaders to Zhang Wuji. They heard the sound of iron chains clanging as Xiao Zhao approached to serve them tea. Zhang Wuji said: "Left

Emissary Yang, this young lady has committed no offence. Please unlock the chains and release her!" Yang Xiao said: "I won't dare disobey sect leader's orders." He immediately called for Yang Buhui and told her: "Buhui, the sect leader wants you to unlock Xiao Zhao's chains." Yang Buhui said: "I left the key a drawer in my room." Zhang Wuji said: "That's not a problem. The key wouldn't have been burnt."

Yang Xiao waited until his daughter and Xiao Zhao had left before saying: "Sect leader, though Xiao Zhao is very young her behaviour is quite strange. We have to be cautious towards her." Zhang Wuji asked: "What are her origins?" Yang Xiao answered: "Half a year ago, I took Buhui on a trip down the mountain. We found her in the desert, crying over two dead bodies. We asked her what happened and she replied that they dead were her parents. Her parents had offended a government officer in the Central Plains and her family had been exiled to the Western Regions to work for the military. A few days before, unable to bear their treatment by the Mongol soldiers any longer, they had tried to escape. However, her parents succumbed to their injuries and exhaustion. I saw that she was a young girl all alone in the world. Though her face was ugly, from her speech she was not stupid. So I helped her bury her parents, then took her in as Buhui's maid." Zhang Wuji nodded his head thinking: "So both Xiao Zhao's parents have passed away. Her life is really tragic, no different from me." Yang Xiao continued: "Back in Brightness Peak, one day when I was teaching Buhui martial arts, Xiao Zhao was listening nearby. I was explaining the sixty-four Bagua positions. Buhui had not get grasped the idea when I saw Xiao Zhao's eyes look at the right position." Zhang Wuji said: "It's probably because she's very intelligent. That's why she understood the concept before Sister Buhui." Yang Xiao said: "That's what I thought at first, I was very happy. But when I considered it further, I became suspicious. I deliberately recited an

extremely difficult formula, something I had never taught Buhui. Then I recited some Bagua positions wrongly, only to see her frown slightly - she had noticed the mistakes. Since then I've kept this in mind, knowing that this little girl has been taught by a great master and probably has powerful kungfu. She must have been sent to Brightness Peak by someone to spy on us."

Zhang Wuji said: "It might be that her father was an expert of the Book of Changes and she learnt it from him." Yang Xiao said: "Sect leader please reflect: the literary knowledge of the Book of Changes is different from its application to martial arts. If Xiao Zhao had learnt it from her parents, then they must be top wulin experts. How could they have been killed by Mongol soldiers? At that time, I pretended I had not noticed anything. A few days later, I casually asked her about her parents' names and origins. She smoothly answered everything without revealing the slightest information. At that time I showed no reaction, all I did was warn Buhui to be careful with her. Then one day, I told a joke and Buhui laughed loudly. Xiao Zhao was nearby and she couldn't help laughing as well. She was standing behind Buhui and I, we could not see her. But it so happened that Buhui was playing with a dagger in her hand and her reflection was caught clearly in the dagger. She was no ugly girl! Her features were much more beautiful than Buhui's. But when I turned around, her face had reassumed its squinted eye and twisted mouth look." Zhang Wuji smiled saying: "To twist her face to look ugly all the time...that must be quite difficult." In his heart he thought: "Left Emmissary Yang is truly amazing. There's no Xiao Zhao could continually fool someone like him." Yang Xiao continued: "Even then I kept silent. Late that night, I quietly went to my daughter room to watch Xiao Zhao. I saw that girl leave Buhui's room. She went to the eastern side of the house looking for who-knows-what. She searched carefully in every room and

corner. Unable to bear it any longer, I revealed myself and questioned her - what was she looking for and who order her to spy on Brightness Peak. She calmly replied without panic that no one had sent her. She just enjoyed playing around and being inquisitive. I tried everything to threaten and persuade her but she told me nothing. I locked her up and starved her for seven days and seven nights. Even when she was fainting from starvation she wouldn't say anything. Finally, I locked her up in those iron chains. When she moves, the clanging sound follows so she can't sleathily harm Buhui. I didn't kill her because I wanted to find out her origins. Sect Leader, this girl is definately a spy sent by some enemy. Based on her proficiency in Bagua positions, she's either from Kunlun or E'Mei Sect. But she's still a young girl, no great danger to us. Let her serve you. It is her good fortune that you're willing to show mercy on her."

Zhang Wuji stood up and laughingly said: "We've been cooped up in this underground prison for so long. Don't you think it's now time to go up and stretch our legs?" Yang Xiao asked happily: "Are we going out now?" Zhang Wuji answered: "Those who have yet to recover cannot fight. They don't have to contribute to our cause now. The rest can all go out. What do you think?" When Yang Xiao gave the order, the secret tunnel was filled joyous cheering and bustling activity.

They had entered the tunnel through the entrance in Yan Buhui's room. Now they went out through the side entrance, coming out behind the mountain. Zhang Wuji pushed away the stone blocking the entrance, let everyone through, then pushed the stone back into place. The Earth Flag Leader Yan Yuan was the Ming Cult's strongest man. He experimentally tried to move the rock but it would not even budge. It was as if he was a dragonfly trying to move a stone pillar. His admiration for his young sect leader increased.

They did not want to alert the enemy so they came out of the secret tunnel silently. Not even a cough was heard. Zhang Wuji stood on top of a large rock. The moonlight shone down on them. To the west were the ranks of the Heavenly Eagle Sect: the three halls - Heaven's Secret, Purple Secret and Heaven's City - and the five branches - Divine Snake, Green Dragon, White Tiger, Crimson Sparrow and Black Valiant. They formed orderly rows, each with its own leader. On the east were the Ming Cult's Five Flags: Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. The Flags were arranged in the Five Elements position with their leaders and deputy leaders at the head. In the middle were the Brightness Peak troops, the Four Gates under Yang Xiao's command - Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder - headed by their own leaders. The Heaven Gate was made out of Central Plains men, the Earth Gate out of Central Plains women, the Wind Gate out of members who had taken religious orders, and the Thunder Gate out of non-Chinese from the Western Regions. Though most of the Five Flags and Four Gates members had been wounded in last battle, they were all full of spirit and vigour. The Green Wing Bat King Wei Yixiao, Leng Qian and the rest of the Five Wanderers stood protectively behind Zhang Wuji. Everyone waited respectfully for the Sect Leader's orders. Zhang Wuji slowly said: "Enemies have invaded our territory. No matter how patient we are, we cannot tolerate this. However I don't want any needless killing and injuring. Keep this in mind. The Heavenly Eagle Sect will attack from the west under the command of Sect Leader Yin. The Five Elements Flags will attack from the east under the command of Wood Flag's Flag Leader Wen Cangsong. Left Emmisarry Yang will lead the Heaven and Earth Gates to attack the north. The Five Wanderers will lead the Wind and Thunder Gates to attack the south. Bat King Wei and I will direct the proceedings." Everyone bowed and accepted their orders.

Zhang Wuji waved his left hand and said softly: "Go!" The four divisions separated and surrounded Brightness Peak from the north, south, east and west. Zhang Wuji turned to Wei Yixiao and said: "Bat King, let us launch a surprise attack from the secret tunnel." Wei Yixiao said happily: "Great idea!" The two of them re-entered the secret tunnel and surfaced in Yang Buhui's room.

They had to push hard and expend a lot of energy before they could move the pile of gravel and burnt wood blocking the trapdoor. The first thing they smelt when they came out of the tunnel was the stench of burnt things. At that time, the Ming Cult troops were still a distance away. But their presence had already been discovered by the enemies still left on Brightness Peak, they called out warning their comrades. Zhang Wuji and Wei Yixiao smiled at each other, thinking: "All this fuss over nothing. Our victory is easily assured." They hid themselves behind a partially collapsed wall. In the moonlight, they could see people running back and forth. Not long later, Shuo Bu De and Zhou Dian arrived side-by-side from the south and launched themselves into the press of enemies. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao and the Five Flags soon appeared. Yelling loudly, they threw themselves forward to attack, like a tiger pouncing on a flock of sheep. The enemies who had attacked Brightness Peak were the Beggars Clan, Wushan Clan, Sea Sand Clan and about ten other sects organisations. When they saw Brightness Peak razed to the ground, they thought they had won a great victory. So the Beggars Clan, Great Whale Clan and most of the other sects had left the mountain. There were only four groups still on Brightness Peak: the Divine Fist Clan, Three Rivers Clan, Wushan Clan and the Five Wind Sabres Clan. The Ming Cult's attack was very sudden. Though there were skilled fighters among the four clans, they were no match for the lights of Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng. In the time it took for rice to cook, a large number of them were dead or

injured.

Zhang Wuji came out and said clearly: "The Ming Cult's top fighters have gathered on Brightness Peak. Listen up everyone: there's no point fighting any longer. Throw your weapons down and surrender. We'll spare your lives and see you on your way down the mountain."

Many members of the four clans were dead or injured. The rest could see that it was pointless to keep fighting. One by one, they threw down their weapons and surrendered. Over the last ten days, the Wushan Clan had built a number of temporary shelters. Now the Wood Flag members started cutting down trees and building more thatched shelters. The female Earth Gate members busied themselves boiling water and preparing food.

The Ming Cult built a large fire and thanked the Holy Fire for its protection. The White Browed Eagle King Yin Tianzheng stood up and shouted: "All members of the Heavenly Eagle Sect listen: Our sect and Ming Cult have the same origins, we are really the same. Over twenty years ago, I had a disagreement with my Ming Cult comrades. So I left for the south-east and set up my own sect. Now the Ming Cult has recognised Hero Zhang as their leader, all the past differences have been forgotten. From this day on, the words 'Heavenly Eagle Sect' no longer exists on this earth. All of us are Ming Cult members, we'll all obey Sect Leader Zhang's orders. Anyone who disagrees can leave the mountain now!" The Heavenly Eagle Sect members cheered joyously, all saying: "The Heavenly Eagle Sect broke away from Ming Cult, now it's returning to its roots. It's a wonderful thing for all of us to enter the Ming Cult. Sect Leader Yin and Sect Leader Zhang are relatives, it makes no difference whose orders we obey." Yin Tianzheng shouted: "From today onwards, there is only Sect Leader Zhang. Anyone who calls

me 'Sect Leader Yin' is a rebel." Zhang Wuji saluted with his hands and said: "The Heavenly Eagle Sect's reunification with Ming Cult is a wonderful thing. The thing is, I only accepted the position as sect leader because of the urgent circumstances. Now that the enemies have been driven away, we should select a new sect leader. There are many great heros in the sect. I'm young and ignorant, how dare I continue as sect leader?" Zhou Dian yelled: "Sect leader, please think about us all. We, who've been fighting among ourselves for the posiion, have set accepted you as our leader. If you insist on declining the position, just appoint someone else as sect leader. Hrmph! No matter who it is, I, Zhou Dian, will be the first to reject him. Even if you choose me, I'll still reject it." Peng Yingyu said: "Sect leader, if you refuse to take up this burden, the Ming Cult will return to infighting and killing. When that happens, are we to beg you to save us again?"

Zhang Wuji thought: "What they say is true. In these circumstances, how can I just shake my sleeves and leave? But I neither know how to nor want to be a sect leader." He said clearly: "Since you value me so much, I won't dare refuse. However, I have three conditions. If you don't accept them, I would rather die than become sect leader." Everyone said: "We would not dare disobey sect leader's orders. No matter whether it's three conditions or thirty, we'll agree. Please state your conditions." Zhang Wuji said: "Our sect has been labelled heretical and evil. That is probably because others do not understand our religion. But because of our large numbers, it is difficult to pick out our bad members and some unworthy ones have harmed the innocent. This is my first condition: from now onwards, everyone, including myself, must strictly adhere to the rules of our religion. We must destroy the wicked and uphold the righteous. We have to support and love each other, steering our brothers away from the wrongful path." He turned to

Zhou Dian and said: "Cursing and arguing is fine, fighting is forbidden. I appoint Mr Leng Qian as Disciplinary Officer. Those who break the rules or fight with a brother will be severely punished. This includes myself, my grandfather, uncle and other elders." Everyone bowed and said: "That is how it should be." Leng Qian took a step forward and said: "I accept your orders!" He was a man of few words. By this he meant that he accepted the responsibility and would do his very best. Zhang Wuji said: "The second condition is more difficult. The enmity between our sect and the major sects of the Central Plains is great. Both parties have had their disciples, family members and dear friends killed and injured. From now on we will let matters rest and not seek them out for revenge." Everyone felt that this was not fair, no one spoke for some time.

Zhou Dian said: "What if they bother us again?" Zhang Wuji said: "We'll act according to the circumstances. If they force our hand, we'll have no to fight back." The Iron Hat Priest said: "Alright! After all, our lives were saved by Sect Leader. If he wants us to do this, we'll do it." Peng Yingyu said loudly: "Brothers:The Central Plains sects killed many of our people, but we also killed many of their people. If we get caught in a circle of killing and revenge, even more people will die. It's for our own good that Sect Leader orders us not to go looking for revenge." Everyone realised that he was right, so they agreed. Zhang Wuji was very happy. He cupped his fists and said: "Your open-heartedness is a blessing to the world." He then ordered the leaders of the Five Element Flags to release the Divine Fist Sect, Wushan Clan and the other prisoners, tell them of the Ming Cult's intentions to make peace with Central Plains sects, and escort them down the mountain.

Zhang Wuji said: "The third condition concerns the late sect leader Yang's will. His will said that whoever recovered the

Sacred Fire Scriptures will become Ming Cult's thirty-fourth sect leader. Until then, the Golden Hair Lion King Xie Xun is to take his place. We'll first set out for sea to bring Protector King Xie back, then think of a way to recover the Sacred Fire Scriptures. When that is done, you can have no more objections to me retiring." When everyone heard this, they couldn't help looking at each other thinking: "We've been a headless dragon for so many years. Now we finally have a wise, brave, benevolent and righteous hero as our sect leader. What if some incompetent disciple accidentally stumbles across the Sacred Fire Scriptures in the future? We can't make someone like that our sect leader." Yang Xiao said: "Sect Leader Yang's will was written over twenty years ago. The situation is very different now. We definitely have to bring the Golden Hair Lion King back and recover the Sacred Fire Scriptures. But we cannot accept someone else as sect leader." Zhang Wuji firmly stated that Yang Dingtian's wishes had to be followed. So the rest had to grudgingly agree. They all thought: "The Golden Hair Lion King probably died a long time ago. The Sacred Fire Scriptures have been lost for hundreds of years, they may never be found. Let's agree first, if things change in the future then we'll reason with him." Zhang Wuji had been thinking about these three conditions for the last 10 days. Now hearing everyone agree, he was extremely happy. He immediately ordered them to slaughter some cows and goats. Using the blood, he drank an oath with them. Zhang Wuji said: "The most important thing to do now is to go out to sea and find Protector King Xie. I have to go personally on this mission. Who else will go with me?" Everyone stood up and said: "We're willing to go out to sea with you." Zhang Wuji had just been thrust into this position. He knew he lacked the skills and capabilities to handle it. So he conferred quietly with Yang Xiao for a while. Then he said clearly: "We don't need many people to come with us to sea. Moreover, there are many other things to

attend to. Let's do it this way: Left Emmissary Yang, please remain on Brightness Peak with the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates to reconstruct our headquarters. The Five Flags will carry the news of our three conditions to the members in other places. Would grandfather and uncle please lead the Heavenly Eagle Flag to investigate if enemies intend to make trouble for us. Then seek out the whereabouts of the Right Emmissary and the Purple Robed Dragon King. Bat King Wei, please set out to inform the six major sects of our intentions to make peace. Even if we can't turn enenmity into friendship, at the very least we can stop fighting. This is a very difficult task. However, with yor great wisdom you'll definately be able to accomplish it. The Five Wanderers will accompany me out to sea to find Protector King Xie." As the sect leader, though his speech was humble and polite, every word was an order that cannot be disobeyed. Everyone accepted this tasks. Yang Buhui said: "Dad, I want to go sea to see the iceberg." Yang Xiao smiled and said: "You'll have to ask sect leader for permission. I have no authority to decide." Yang Buhui only kept silent. Zhang Wuji smiled, thinking of the time he brought her to the west. Along the way he had entertained her with stories about the polar bears, seals, strange fish and all sorts of other animals, now she wanted to see them for herself. He said: "Little sister Buhui, ocean travel is dangerous. If you're not afraid and Left Emmissary Yang is willing to let you go, then both of you can come with me." Yang Buhui clapped her hands and said: "I'm not afraid on anything. Dad, let's go with Big Brrother Wuji.....no, with Sect Leader!" Yang Xiao did not answer, he looked at Zhang Wuji waiting for his decision. Zhang Wuji said: "Alright then. I'll trouble Mr Leng to remain on Brightness Peak to temporarily assume command of the Four Gates." Leng Qian said: "Yes!" Zhou Dian clapped his hands and stamped his feet, yelling: "Wonderful, wonderful!" Shuo Bu De asked: "Brother Zhou, what's so wonderful?" Zhou Dian replied: "Sect leader thinks

so highly of Leng Qian, that's great for the Five Wanderer's image. Plus, who knows how long we'll be at sea, at least there'll be two extra people to talk to. If I want to argue with someone, there's always Left Emmissary Yang. Otherwise I'll have to talk to Leng Qian, and he's just like a wooden dummy." Everyone burst out laughing. Leng Qian did not get angry, neither did he laugh. He just acted like he had heard nothing.

They all ate their fill then separated to rest. Zhang Wuji wanted Yang Buhui to unlock Xiao Zhao's chains. However they could not find the key amidst all the debris. Xiao Zhao said indifferently: "I like the sound these chains make when I move. It's alright if I keep wearing them." Zhang Wuji reassured her: "Xiao Zhao, wait here at Brightness Peak. When I bring my godfather back, I'll borrow his Dragon Sabre to cut the chains off." Xiao Zhao shook her head without answering.

The next morning, Zhang Wuji lead his party to bid farewell to Leng Qian. Leng Qian said: "Sect leader, take care." Zhang Wuji said: "Mr Leng, your job at headquarters is a difficult one." Leng Qian turned to Zhou Dian and said: "Be careful, don't let strange fish eat you!" Zhou Dian grasped his hand feeling touched. The Five Wanderers were as close as brothers. Leng Qian rarely spoke so these few extra words showed that he was very worried that some strange fish would eat his brother in the middle of the ocean. Leng Qian and the Four Gates accompanied them to the foot of Brightness Peak, then they parted.

End of Chapter 22.

Chapter 23 - Intoxicating Lotus of the Green Willow Manor

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhang Wuji he said, "In order to save others, I have to play rough. I apologize for being inappropriate." Grabbing her left foot he tore away her shoe and sock. Zhao Min was both angry and scared. "Stinky boy, what are you doing?" she asked. Zhang Wuji did not answer. He grabbed her right foot and also took her shoe and sock away.

They continued their journey for more than a hundred 'li's before spending the night on the desert. Zhang Wuji slept until midnight, when suddenly he heard a faint 'dingdong, dingdong' of clear metallic noise coming from the west. His heart was stirred. Immediately he woke up and quietly went toward the incoming noise. Rushing ahead for about a 'li' he saw a shadow of a small person moving under the moonlight. He sped up his steps and called out, "Xiao Zhao, why are you following us?"

That shadow was indeed Xiao Zhao. As soon as she saw Zhang Wuji, "Wah!" she broke into tears and threw herself on his bosom; sobbing and crying without saying anything.

Zhang Wuji gently patted her shoulder and said, "Good child, don't cry, don't cry!"

Apparently Xiao Zhao had experienced much suffering and grievance; as she finally was able to vent it off, she cried even louder. "Wherever you go, I ... I will follow you."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This little girl's parents are dead; and Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang] father and daughter always suspect her, she is truly pitiful. Just because I treated her nicely she is quite attached to me." He said, "Very well, don't cry. I will take you to the sea with me."

Xiao Zhao was elated; she looked up. The dim and hazy moonlight shone on her simple and beautiful, yet elegant, small face like a layer of fine veil. The crystal clear tears had not been wiped out; yet her eyes shone with happiness just like the waves of the sea.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "Xiao Zhao, when you grow up, you will be very beautiful."

Xiao Zhao laughed, "How do you know?" she asked.

Before Zhang Wuji could answer they suddenly heard the noise of hoof beats toward northeast to them; a large group of riders galloped from the west heading to the east. It sounded like there were at least a hundred riders.

A short time later Wei Yixiao and Yang Xiao hurriedly came one after another. "Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]," they said, "A large group of riders speed along in the middle of the night, chances are they are the enemy of the cult."

Zhang Wuji told Xiao Zhao to join Peng Yingyu and the others, while he took Wei and Yang two people toward the noise of hoof beats to investigate.

When they got nearer, they saw a row of horse hoof prints on the sand. Wei Yixiao stooped down to take a look; he grabbed a handful of sand and said, "There is a bloodstain."

Zhang Wuji took the sand toward his nose and smelled fresh stench of blood. Following the print on the sand three people pursued for several 'li's. Suddenly Yang Xiao saw a half-broken blade on the sand to his left. He picked it up to take a closer look, and saw three characters engraved on the hilt, 'Feng Yuansheng'. He hesitated for a moment before saying, "This belonged to a member of Kongtong Sect.

Jiaozhu, I think Kongtong people prepared some horses in here to take them back to the Central Plains."

"It's been more than half a month since the battle of the Brightness Peak," Wei Yixiao said, "I wonder what craftiness they are up to by still being here?"

As they knew it was the Kongtong people, three people set

their hearts at peace. They returned to their camp and slept peacefully. Toward the afternoon of the fifth day they saw a group of pedestrians on the prairie ahead; most of them were Buddhist nuns wearing dark robes, along with some seven, eight men.

As they were getting closer to each other, one of the nuns called out with a sharp voice, "It's the evil thieves from the Devil Cult!" Everybody unsheathed their weapons and spread out in battle formation.

Zhang Wuji knew they were from the Emei Sect, but he had never met any one of them before. "Are 'Shitai's from the Emei Sect?" he asked in clear voice.

A small and wiry middle-aged nun stepped out and in stern voice said, "Evil thief from the Devil Cult, why do you ask? Come out here to receive your death."

"How must I address Shitai?" Zhang Wuji asked, "Why are you so angry?"

"Evil thief!" that nun roared, "Are you worthy to ask my name? Who are you?"

Wei Yixiao dashed toward the incoming group of people. He sealed two male disciples' acupoints. Grabbing the back of their collars he kicked the ground and flew some distance away. Leaving the two men on the ground he swiftly returned to his original position. His movements were as quick as a falcon snatching a rabbit; his speed was unbelievably fast. With a cold laugh he said, "This is the Number One Martial Artist of the present age, peerless under the heaven, unifying the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries under his command, leading the Four Cult Protector Kings, the Five Wanderers, the Five-Element Flags,

the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates; the Zhang Jiaozhu of Ming Cult. He drove away the Emei Sect down the mountain; he snatched away the Yitian sword from Mie Jue Shitai's hand. With his reputation, don't you think he is worthy to ask Shitai's illustrious name?"

The Emei Sect disciples were astonished at his words, but as they had seen Wei Yixiao's demonstration of such an unthinkable skill, nobody doubted what he said. After calming herself down the middle-aged nun asked, "Who are you, Sire?"

"My surname is Wei, my nickname is Green Winged Bat King," Wei Yixiao answered. The Emei disciples cried out in alarm; immediately four of them went to take a look at their two comrades. Wei Yixiao said, "We have received Zhang Jiaozhu's command: The Ming Cult and the Six Major Sects are to refrain from fighting each other, to forget faults and repair goodness. Your disciples are fortunate, Bat King Wei did not suck their blood."

After Zhang Wuji treated his injury with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, not only had the cold poison of the Xuan Yin fingers been driven out, but the previously accumulated poison in his system had also been expelled for the most part; so that every time he exerted his internal strength he did not have to suck blood to resist the cold anymore.

Those four Emei disciples took their two comrades back to the group. They were still thinking on how to unseal their acupoints when they heard two swishing noise. Two small pebbles flew, splitting the air, toward two people's acupoints, unsealing them. It was Yang Xiao, using Divine Flicking Finger transmitting his 'zhi shi dian xue' [acupoint sealing technique by throwing rocks] skill.

The middle-aged nun had to admit that not only the opposite party was numerous, the two people who had just demonstrated their skills showed that their martial arts were much higher. If they had to fight, her group would inevitably suffer a big loss. Besides, she was not sure if the so-called 'refrain from fighting each other, to forget faults and repair goodness' was true or not; therefore, she said, "Pin ni [lit. impoverished nun] 'fa ming' [Buddhist name/title, not real name] is Jing Kong. Have you gentlemen seen my Shifu?"

"Honorable Master has left the Brightness Peak more than half a month ago," Zhang Wuji said, "I believe by this time they have reached the Yumen [Jade Gate] pass. You have come from the east; could it be that you missed each other?"

A thirty-something woman behind Jing Kong said, "Shijie [martial (older) sister], don't listen to his nonsense; there were three groups of us, each with flare signals, how can we miss them?"

Listening to her rudeness Zhou Dian wanted to teach her some lessons; he said, "It's so strange ..." But Zhang Wuji cut him off in low voice, "Mr. Zhou, don't lower yourself to the same level with her. They could not find their Shifu, naturally they are anxious."

Jing Kong's face showed suspicions. "Have our Master and comrades fallen into the Ming Cult's hand?" she asked, "As men of honor, shouldn't you tell us the truth?"

Zhou Dian laughed. "Let me be frank to you: the Emei Sect came and without considering their own strength, attacked the Brightness Peak, so everybody from Mie Jue Shitai down to her last disciple were captured and detained in the underwater prison. Let them ponder over their own faults for

eight years, ten years, then we'll talk about whether we should release them or not," he said.

Peng Yingyu quickly said, "Please don't mind Zhou Xiong's [Brother Zhou] joke; Mie Jue Shitai's divine energy is matchless, each of your fellow disciples' martial art is superior, how can they fall into Ming Cult's hand? Let us not talk any further; please return to Emei, I am sure you'll see each other then."

Jing Kong half believed half doubted; she could not make up her mind. Wei Yixiao said, "This Zhou Xiong loves to joke around. But do you think our Cult Leader would swindle juniors like you?"

The middle-aged woman said, "The Devil Cult is always crafty, deceitful and sly; how can we believe anything you said?"

Tang Yang, the Flag Leader of the Flooding Water Flag waved his left hand; immediately the Five Element Flags spread out to surround the Emei disciples. The Gigantic Wood on the east, the Raging Fire on the south, the Sharp Metal on the west, the Flooding Water on the north, the Thick Earth moving outside the encirclement, ready to respond.

In a loud voice Yin Tianzheng said, "Lao Fu [Old Man] is the White Browed Eagle King. I alone am enough to capture all of you juniors. The Ming Cult is showing mercy to you today; as younger generation you should think before you speak." He spoke with a thunderous voice, shaking the Emei disciples' ear drums so that their ears were ringing and their minds were troubled; making them difficult to concentrate. Looking at his white eyebrows and white beard and witnessing his divine power their hearts shivered in fear; everybody was dumbstruck in amazement.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Please convey my respect to your honorable master; tell her the Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji wishes her well." Thereupon he led his people continue their journey to the east.

Tang Yang waited until Wei Yixiao, Yin Tianzheng and the other walked pass one by one before he waved his hand once again to recall the Five Element Flags. The Emei disciples watched this procession in awe; their hearts were filled with fear, their eyes followed Zhang Wuji and his entourage for a while, jaws dropped and speechless.

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu, I believe there is something fishy here. Mie Jue Shitai and the others have left to the east; I couldn't think of any reason why they miss their disciples. Every sect every organization has their own special symbol for communicating with each other; how can they miss each other's track?"

They continued their journey while discussing this strange occurrence. They thought it was unfathomable to think this many Emei disciples to suddenly vanish in the desert. Zhang Wuji was concerned over Zhou Zhiruo's safety and well-being; but he was uncomfortable to share his thoughts with other people.

One day, towards the evening, the Flag Leader of the Thick Earth Flag, Yan Yuan suddenly exclaimed, "There is something strange here!" Rushing ahead he carefully examined the shrubs on their left. He took an iron spade from one his comrades and started digging the earth. Not too long afterwards, a corpse was revealed. It had been decayed, its face was unrecognizable, but judging from the clothes, it was a Kunlun Sect disciple.

The Thick Earth Flag members immediately began excavating the earth around and very soon they dug a big hole. There were sixteen corpses lying around randomly inside the hole; all were Kunlun Sect disciples. If it were their own school, in no way would they be buried this carelessly; so it was obvious that they were buried by the enemy. Looking at these corpses, every single one of them had weapon-inflicted wounds. Zhang Wuji ordered the Thick Earth Flag to bury each corpse separately and properly. Everybody looked at each other; their minds were filled with the same question: "Who did this?"

After getting over their shock, Peng Yingyu said, "If this matter is not brought to light, these bad debts would certainly be heaped upon our heads."

In a clear voice Shuo Bude said, "Everybody, listen up! If we are facing blades and spears in a broad daylight war under our Jiaozhu's command, although I do not dare to say that we are invincible, but we wouldn't lose to other people in any way. However, a stab in the back is more difficult to guard against. Therefore, from now on we must guard against the enemy's poisonous plot in every drop of water we drink, every food we eat and at every accommodation we stay." The Cult complied in one voice.

Continuing their journey a little bit further, the setting sun appeared red like blood, very soon the sky would turn dark. They were just about to find a place to spend the night when they saw four bald condors circling the sky continuously toward the northeast. Suddenly a bald eagle dived down but flew back up immediately; some of its feathers fell and it cried out in pain. Apparently it was struck with something from below and it suffered an injury.

After Zhuang Zheng, the Flag Leader of the Sharp Metal Flag

died under the Yitian Sword, Zhang Wuji promoted the Flag Leader Deputy Wu Jincao to be the Flag Leader. Seeing the strange bald eagle Wu Jincao said, "Let me take a look." Leading two of his brethren he rushed ahead.

A moment later one of them came back and reported to Zhang Wuji, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: Yin Liu Xia [The Sixth Hero Yin] of Wudang Sect has fallen inside that valley."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Yin Liu Xia?" he asked, "Is he injured?"

"Apparently he is seriously injured," the man replied, "As soon as the Flag Leader Wu recognized Yin Liu Xia, he ordered subordinate to report to the Jiaozhu. Flag Leader Wu is going down the valley to rescue ..."

Zhang Wuji was extremely shocked; he rushed toward the valley without waiting for the man to finish his report. Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others followed behind. When they got near they saw a big sandy valley, more than a dozen of 'zhang's deep. Wu Jincao, with Yin Liting in his left arm, was stepping up and falling, strenuously trying to climb up the valley. Zhang Wuji slid down the valley wall; with one hand he grabbed Wu Jincao's right arm, with the other he examined Yin Liting's breath. He was slightly relieved to feeling a weak breath. Holding Yin Liting in his arms he leaped vertically several times and was out of the sandy valley then he laid Yin Liting down on the ground. As he calmed himself down and examined him, he was startled and his heart filled with grief and indignation. He found out that Yin Liting's knees, elbows, ankles, wrists, feet, fingers; in short, all joints on his four limbs were broken. And as Yin Liting was at the point of his death, unable to move, the enemy fed him some poison. It was truly an unheard amount of cruelty.

Yin Liting was still conscious; seeing Zhang Wuji, his face showed happiness and he spat out two small pebbles from his mouth. Apparently he was pushed down the sandy valley after he was injured, but due to his profound internal energy he did not die. The bald condors wanted to eat him, so he leaned his head sideways and bit some pebbles on the ground. With his strong internal energy he managed to shoot the pebbles up and thus had survived for several days with untold hardships.

Yang Xiao saw the four bald condors were still circling overhead; seemingly waiting for them to leave Yin Liting and then they would swoop down to feast on his corpse. Yang Xiao picked four small stones from the ground and 'swish, swish' flicked those stone up. Four bald condors successively fell on the ground, their heads were smashed by the stones.

Zhang Wuji gave Yin Liting a pill to stop the pain and protect his heart; then he thoroughly examined him. After finding more than twenty breaks on Yin Liting's four limbs, each and every one of them was crushed by heavy fingers' strength, Wuji was not able to continue the examination.

In a low voice Yin Liting said, "It's just like San Ge [third (older) brother]; Shaolin Sect ... 'jin gang zhi dao' [diamond finger blade. Chapter 3 has it as 'Golden Steel Finger'; 'jin gang' could also mean 'a very hard substance'. I am not sure why it has an extra 'blade' (?) character; I think it was a mistake, it should be 'strength/power' (?) character.] ... injured by finger strength." Zhang Wuji recalled his father telling him about how San Shibo [third martial (older) uncle] Yu Daiyan was injured; his joints were also crushed by Shaolin Sect's Diamond Finger 'Power'; and as a result he had been bedridden for more than twenty years. At that time his parents had not yet acquainted with each other.

Unexpectedly many years later one more of his shishu [martial (younger) brother] had fallen under the same Shaolin Sect's Diamond Finger. After calming himself down he said, "Liu Shu [sixth (younger) uncle], don't you worry. This matter has fallen into your nephew's hands. The criminal responsible for this will not escape justice. Which Shaolin Sect disciple did this, does Liu Shu know?"

Yin Liting shook his head. He had suffered untold hardship these past several days; he was already dead-tired. At this moment his heart was relieved, he could not hold any longer and passed out. Zhang Wuji remembered his own life; how his parents committed suicide for his San Shibo's sake. Today his Liu Shishu had fallen under similar circumstances. If he could not force Shaolin Sect to hand over the criminal responsible for this cruelty, how could he fulfill his duty toward his Yu and Yin uncles? How could he be worthy to see his departed parents? He knew that although Yin Liting was severely injured, his life was not in danger. Only his limbs would be difficult to heal; most likely he would end up sharing Yu Daiyan's fate.

Zhang Wuji's experience was limited; facing this unfortunate situation he had to calm himself and think carefully. With his hands behind his back he wandered off some distance away; finally he sat down on top of a small hill. Two thoughts were waging war inside his mind: "Shall I go to the Shaolin Temple and find the criminal to avenge Father, Mother, San Shibo and Liu Shishu? If Shaolin Sect is willing to admit honestly and hand over the criminal, naturally nothing can be better than that. Otherwise, should Ming Cult join hand with Wudang Sect to deal with Shaolin together? My brethren and I have already drunk blood and made an oath, not to seek enmity with various sects, clans and societies ['pai', 'bang' and 'hui']. But as soon as I take this matter personally, I might as well throw the oath out the window; how can I win everybody's heart? Once the disaster

gate is opened blood will be avenged, I don't know how many generations this bloodshed will continue, and how many heroes and warriors life will be sacrificed?"

In the meantime the sky had turned dark; the Ming Cult people built a fire and cooked their meals. Zhang Wuji was still sitting on the hill. He saw the bright moon rise, but he still could not make up his mind. He was deep in thought until almost midnight before he finally decided: "I'll go to Shaolin Temple and see Abbott Kong Wen; I'll explain everything and ask him to render justice." But then he thought again, "What if we reach deadlock? Must I fight? Then what will happen?" He heaved a deep sigh, stood up and thought, "I am young yet have to bear a heavy responsibility. Right from the start I face this extremely difficult situation. I wholeheartedly want to avert the war and the fighting; but this deep hatred is shoved into my face. I bear the heavy responsibility of the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, I can't get away from it; consequently I'll have to face endless and exhausting hardships! If only I am not the Cult Leader, wouldn't that be a lot better?"

As he returned to the fire he saw that everybody was very hungry but nobody dared to move their chopsticks to eat; they were standing up respectfully, waiting for him. Zhang Wuji felt very bad and busily said, "Next time you can go ahead and eat; you don't have to wait for me." He went over to see Yin Liting's condition. He saw Yang Buhui had already cleaned his wounds with hot water and was feeding him hot soup. Yin Liting was still in daze; suddenly he opened his eyes and stared at Yang Buhui and loudly said, "Xiaofu Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], I miss you so much, do you know it?"

Yang Buhui blushed; her face looked awkward. With her right hand holding the soup spoon she said in a low voice,

“Drink some more soup.”

“Promise me you won’t leave me forever,” Yin Liting said.

“All right! All right!” Yang Buhui replied, “Drink this soup first, we’ll talk later.” Yin Liting looked very happy; he opened his mouth and drank the soup.

The next day Zhang Wuji passed an order for everybody not to go their assigned destinations for the time being, but to go to Shaolin Temple at Mount Song [‘song shan’], to find out the whole story about Yin Liting’s injury first and to talk about other things later. Wei Yixiao, Zhou Dian and the others had seen the severity of Yin Liting’s injury, every one of them was enraged; hearing their Cult Leader’s order to seek justice at the Shaolin Temple they cheered loudly.

Yang Xiao had always felt regret and guilt toward Yin Liting over Ji Xiaofu’s affair; although his mouth did not say anything, in his heart he was determined to avenge him with all his might. He also quietly told his daughter to take a good care of Yin Liting and thus clearing his conscience.

From here on they did not meet any other strange events along their way. When Yin Liting awoke later, Zhang Wuji asked him again the circumstances surrounding his injury. It was still difficult for Yin Liting to speak, he said, “Shaolin Sect’s monks, five of them besieged me. They were using Shaolin martial arts, I can’t be wrong.”

That day they have entered the Yumen pass. They sold their camels and bought some horses so as not to raise any suspicions. They also changed their clothes and dressed up as traders. Some of them acquired mule carts and loaded them with leathers, goods, medicine, and other commodities. The next day early in the morning they left to get an early start along the Ganliang main road. The sun

was blazing like fire, the temperature was starting to rise.

After journeying for more than four hours they saw a row of about twenty willow trees ahead of them. They were very happy and urged their mounts to pick up speed since they wanted to take a rest under those trees. When they got closer they saw there were nine people sitting under the trees. Eight of them were big men dressed as hunters, with blades on their waists and bows and arrows on their shoulders. They also had five, six hunting falcons with them; the falcons looked fearsome with black feathers and sharp claws. The last man was a young gentleman, wearing a sapphire blue silk gown, lightly waving a folding fan in his hand. His appearance carried an elegant air around him.

Zhang Wuji turned around and dismounted his horse. He cast a glance toward that young gentleman; he noticed his facial features are delicate and exceptionally handsome. His dark eyes accentuated his white face, they were shining brightly. The folding fan in his hand had a white jade handle; the hand which waved the fan was as white as the fan handle. But everybody's attention was caught by that young gentleman's waist. They saw a golden hook, bound by a belt inlaid with precious stones; on this hook a long sword was hung. On the hilt of the sword was carved 'yi tian' two 'zhuan wen' characters [script character normally used on official seal]. The length and the shape of this sword were exactly like the one Mie Jue Shitai used to slaughter the Ming Cult people and the one Zhou Zhiruo used to stab Zhang Wuji that he almost died earlier.

The Ming Cult people were startled; as Zhou Dian was about to open his mouth to inquire when they heard from the east of the main road a disorder noise of hoof beats, a group of riders in a chaotic manner approached. They were a group of approximately fifty, sixty of Yuan soldiers, dragging along

over a hundred women tied in ropes. These women were mostly small in stature; how could they follow the horses? Some of them fell down to the ground, but the soldiers kept pulling the rope so that the women were dragged on the ground. All women were Han people; obviously they were common people who were held captive by the Yuan soldiers. Most of their clothes had been ripped apart; some were almost naked. They were crying and weeping; creating an extremely heart-wrenching noise. Some of the soldiers had wine bottles in their hands; it seemed like they were drunk. Some wielded whips and struck the women. These Mongolian soldiers spent most of their lives on the horseback, so their skill in using whip was excellent. Once the whip was lashed, a piece of the women's clothing was gone amidst the cheering and laughing of the soldiers.

The Mongolians had invaded China for almost a hundred years; they regarded the Han people lower than animals, only this kind of wantonly obscene and oppressive insult in broad daylight was actually extremely rare. The Ming Cult people's eyes narrowed into slits; they were waiting for Zhang Wuji to issue an order and they would charge to kill the soldiers and rescue the women. Suddenly that young gentleman said, "Wu Liupo, tell them to release these women and stop deliberately making such trouble!" His voice was clear and tender, sounded like a female's voice.

"Yes!" one of the men replied. He loosened one of the yellow horses tied on the willow tree, leaped up and landed on the horseback. He galloped forward while shouting, "Hey, you deliberately create trouble in broad daylight. Don't you have a superior to control you? Quickly release these women!"

From among the Yuan soldiers one rider that looked like an officer came out. A young girl in his arm, his slanting eyes bleary, he laughed and said, "You are really impatient to die,

sticking your nose into your master's business!"

That man coldly said, "You are officers and soldiers, yet you act like bandits and robbers, without any compassion toward common people. Just do as I say!"

The officer sized up the people underneath the willow trees; he was slightly surprised at the audacity of this man. He mused in his heart that when commoners see soldiers, they usually would try to avoid them while they are still far away; could it be that these people had eaten a leopard's gallbladder and a tiger's heart that they dare to mess up the soldiers' business? Sweeping his gaze he saw the young gentleman's hat was inlaid with two shining bright, longan fruit size pearls. His greed arose; he smiled broadly and said, "Rabbit master ['tu er xiang gong' - 'rabbit-like mister', I don't know how to translate this properly], come and follow your master! You will enjoy a lot of happiness!" Pressing his leg he urged his mount toward that young gentleman.

That young gentleman was initially indifferent; he did not show any anger looking at the Yuan soldiers' atrocity. Yet as he heard this officer's rudeness his handsome eyebrows slightly creased, he said, "Don't let a single one of them live."

As the word 'live' left his mouth, a 'swish' sound was heard, a feathered arrow shot out, creating a hole in the officer's chest. The arrow was released by a man standing next to the gentleman. His shooting technique was not only fast, but very strong as well; not in the least bit inferior to an expert of the Wulin world. How could a common hunter have this kind of ability?

'Swish, swish, swish!' Arrow after arrow was shot; all eight hunters shot with great accuracy, not a single arrow missed its target, one arrow killed one Yuan soldier. Although this

attack took the soldiers by surprise, they were all skilled in horseback riding and archery; with loud shouts they returned the attack by shooting arrows. The other seven hunters also mounted their horses and charged forward. Arrow after arrow, in a short moment they had killed about thirty Yuan soldiers. The rest of the soldiers understood their precarious situation; they whistled to each other, threw the women away, turned their horses around and ran away.

The eight hunters pressed their legs and their horses pursued with lightning speed. Eight arrows were shot and eight Yuan soldiers dropped down to the ground, dead. After about a 'li' the Mongolian soldiers were completely annihilated.

The young gentleman led his horse away, mounted it, and without turning his head he galloped away. It seemed like for him, giving order to kill more than fifty Mongolian soldiers was as ordinary as eating his rice; he did not even give it the slightest thought.

"Hey, hey!" Zhou Dian called out, "Wait! I want to ask you something!" The young gentleman did not pay him any attention; in a moment he and his eight hunters had gone far.

If Zhang Wuji, Wei Yixiao and the others really want to ask that young gentleman a question, they could use their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] and overtake the speeding horses; but after witnessing those eight hunters' divine archery skill to annihilate the enemy they were impressed with their chivalry, their hearts were full of admiration, hence they felt it was inappropriate to press and offend those people. Everybody started to talk at once, but nobody knew these nine people's origin.

Yang Xiao said, "That young gentleman is obviously a female wearing male clothes. Those eight men dressed as hunters were very respectful toward her. Their archery skill was divinely marvelous, but it did not look like archery skill of the people of the Central Plains."

By this time Yang Buhui and the Thick Earth Flag members were busy consoling the women. It turned out that they were taken captive from the neighboring villages and small towns. Thereupon the Ming Cult people searched the Yuan soldiers' corpses and took any gold, silver and other valuables, and distributed it to the women and sent them home.

For the next several days the topic of discussion among the Ming Cult people was the nine people whose arrows obliterated the Yuan soldiers. They regretted the fact that they were unable to befriend those people. To Yang Xiao Zhou Dian said, "Yang Xiong [brother Yang], your daughter can be considered a beautiful woman, but I am afraid she falls short compared to that young lady dressed as a man."

"Right, right!" Yang Xiao replied, "If they were willing to join our Cult, those eight hunters' position would be above the Five Wanderers."

"Your mother's stinky fart! [this is one of those 'weird-to-english-speakers'-ears' stuff]" Zhou Dian was angry, "What's so special about horse-riding skill? Just call them to have a contest with Zhou Dian."

Yang Xiao hesitated a moment before replying, "Compared to Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou] they are slightly inferior, but talking about martial art skill, I think they are half a notch higher than Leng Qian Xiong [brother Leng Qian]."

The fact that among the Ming Cult's Five Wanderers it's a well known matter that Leng Qian's martial art skill was the highest. Yang Xiao and Zhou Dian were always at each other's throat. Although they no longer fought each other openly, Zhou Dian had never missed any opportunity to argue with Yang Xiao. This time hearing Yang Xiao said that the eight hunters' martial art was higher than Leng Qian's, in other words, he was looking down upon the Five Wanderers, Zhou Dian was angry. He was about to open his mouth to retort when Peng Yingyu laughed and said, "Zhou Xiong, again you fall into Left Emissary Yang's trap. He was deliberately making you angry!"

Zhou Dian laughed a big laugh and said, "I am not angry; how can he make me angry?" But not too long afterwards he started to mutter how Yang Xiao's riding skill was not so good. Everybody looked at each other and smiled.

Under daily medical care of Zhang Wuji, Yin Liting had begun to regain his consciousness. He said that when he left the Brightness Peak that day, his mind was so shaken that he was lost in the desert. He walked farther and farther away, groping his way on the yellow sand of the Gobi desert for eight, nine days. By the time he found the right direction he had lost contact with his Wudang martial art brothers. That day he unexpectedly ran into five Shaolin monks. Without saying anything these five monks suddenly attacked him. Their martial art skill was not weak; although Yin Liting managed to overthrow two of them, in the end he was still overwhelmed by sheer number and in the end had to suffer heavy injury. He said these five monks' martial art was definitely Shaolin's martial art, only he did not see them on the Brightness Peak; so they must be the reinforcement who came later. On why they attacked him violently, Yin Liting could not come with any plausible answer. One time or another Yin Liting had announced his name, so in no way

would the monks mistake him for someone else.

Along the way Yang Buhui was taking a careful care of Yin Liting. She knew her parents had offended him; but her own compassion also grew because of his pitiful condition. That particular evening they arrived at Yongdeng. They urged their horses because they wanted to reach Jiangchengzi to spend the night there. While walking they suddenly heard horses' hoofs; on the main road two riders were coming fast toward them. When they got within a dozen 'zhang's, suddenly the two riders stopped their mounts and leaped down. Holding the horses' reins they waited on the side of the road; their manners were really respectful. Those two riders were two of the eight hunters who annihilated the Yuan soldiers with their arrows earlier.

The Ming Cult people were delighted; one after another they dismounted their horses to greet the two hunters. The two hunters walked toward Zhang Wuji and bowed in respect. In a clear voice one of them said, "Our superior had long admired the Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu's heroism and chivalry, along with his heroes and warriors. Xiao ren [little/lowly people] have received our superior's order to invite all of you with sincerity and respect to take a rest at our village."

Zhang Wuji returned the respect and said, "We do not dare, we do not dare! I wonder how shall we address your superior?"

That man replied, "Our superior's surname is Zhao; but I do not dare to tell her name without her authorization." Everyone was pleased they openly admitted that the young gentleman was actually a woman in disguise; indicating the sincerity of the invitation.

Zhang Wuji said, "Ever since we saw your divine archery

skill, we have never cease to praise you every day; to be able to make friends with you is truly our good fortune. Only we do not want to impose.”

“You are all the heroes of this generation,” that man replied, “Our superior has admired you for a long time. Today you pass by our residence, how can it be that we do not offer you three cups of our insipid wine and chat with you to build friendship?”

Zhang Wuji wanted to know these warriors better, but he also wanted to inquire about the Yi Tian sword they saw earlier; therefore, he said, “If that’s the case, to refuse would be impolite; we’ll visit your village.”

The two hunters were delighted; they mounted their horses and led the way.

Less than a ‘li’ later two more riders came their way. They stopped some distance away and waited by the side of the road. They were also part of the ‘shen jian ba xiong’ [divine archer eight heroes]. Another ‘li’ later the last four members of the Divine Archer Eight Heroes also came to welcome them. The Ming Cult people were happy and feeling reassured in seeing the courtesy their host demonstrated.

Following a street made of green flagstones they arrived at the courtyard of a big manor. The manor was encircled by a small brook; the bank of the brook was full of green willow trees. To be able to see a Jiannan-like scenery in Gan Liang area, they felt refreshed.

The manor gate was wide open and a draw bridge was already lowered. The lady surnamed Zhao, still wearing a man’s clothes, stood at the gate, welcoming them. Miss Zhao stepped forward and saluted them. “The heroes and

warriors of the Ming Cult's visit to the Green Willow Manor today truly bring glory to us," she said in a clear voice, "Zhang Jiaozhu, please! Left Emissary Yang, please! Yin Lao Qianbei [old senior Yin], please! Bat King Wei, please! ..."

She called out the Ming Cult's people one by one. Not only did she know everybody's name without anybody announcing it to her, but she also knew their respective position; not a single one was missed. Everybody was astonished.

Zhou Dian could not help but asked, "Miss, how did you know our names? Could it be that you know divination?"

Miss Zhao smiled and said, "The Ming Cult's heroes are well-known in the Jianghu, who has not heard of them? In the recent battle of the Brightness Peak Zhang Jiaozhu, with his divine ability, has deterred the six major sects. This news has shaken the Wulin world. You are going east to the Central Plains; along the way I don't know how many Wulin friends will give you admiring receptions, how can this 'xiao nuzi' [lit. little/lowly woman] miss this opportunity?"

Everybody agreed with her and inwardly they were very pleased, but with their mouths they muttered some modest words. They turned toward the Divine Archer Eight Heroes, asking their names and martial art school. One big and tall man answered, "Subordinate is Zhao Yishang [lit. one injury]. This one is Qian Erbai [lit. two defeats]. This one is Sun Sanhui [lit. three destructions]. This one is Li Sicui [lit. four devastations]." Pointing to the other four men he continued, "That one is Zhou Wushu [lit. five loses]. That one is Wu Liupo [lit. six damages]. That one is Zheng Qimie [lit. seven extinguish], and the last one is Wang Bashuai [lit. eight feeble/weak]."

Hearing their names the Ming Cult people were dumbstruck.

They recognized the eight men's surnames were taken from the 'bai jia xing' [Book of Hundred Surnames], namely 'Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zheng Wang.' Not only it was very strange, but their given names were all unlucky. Take 'Wang Bashuai' for example; not even bandits and barbarians would think of such names. But in the Jianghu world it was not uncommon that some people changed their names to avoid calamity or enmity; so nobody asked any further.

Miss Zhao personally led the way, taking everybody to the main hall. They saw in the main hall hung a large wooden tablet with 'lu liu shan zhuang' [Green Willow Villa] four characters engraved on it. In the middle of the hall there was a banner with Zhao Mengxiao's poem:

The white rainbow [oxymoron, I know, but how do you
translate ? ? ?] stood up to fly,
Green serpent roared inside the box,
Murderous frost at the edge of the blade,
The round moon just about to reach its apex.
Sword can tear the dragon on the outer sky,
Sword can charge against the sun,
Sword can slit the demon's abdomen,
Sword can cut away the treacherous minister's head.
Hiding to ward off the demon's enchantment,
Do not frighten the consort.
Keep the sword to behead the scaly dragon,
Do not test it to strike the street dog.

At the end of the poem there was a small inscription, "Testing the precious Yitian Sword in the night, it was truly a treasured thing. I wrote the poem 'shuo jian' [lit. speaking about sword] in praise of it. Bianliang Zhao Min."

Zhang Wuji's calligraphy skill was not too good, but following the 'shu jiu zhen lian' [lit. vermillion nine real/true

practice] character principle [Translator's note: I am sure about this part], he was able to somewhat distinguish other people's penmanship. Looking at the strokes of this poem he saw charm and tenderness, revealing the poem came from a female hand; so it must be this Miss Zhao's handiwork. Other than medical book, he seldom read any other book; but the poem's meaning was certainly not obscure. As soon as he read it he understood its meaning. He thought, "Turned out she is from Bianliang [modern day Kaifeng, previous capital of the Northern Song], and has a single character 'Min' as her name." Thereupon he said, "Miss Zhao is well-versed in both literature and martial art [wen wu quan cai]; my utmost admiration. Turned out Miss belongs to the family of the former capital."

That Miss Zhao, Zhao Min smiled and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu's father was well-known as the 'yin gou tie hua' [Silver Hook Iron Stroke], a calligraphy expert. Zhang Jiaozhu received your educational background from your family, 'xiao nuzi' earnestly wants to see a poem from your hand."

Upon hearing this Zhang Wuji's face turned red; he lost his father when he was ten and had not learned penmanship from him. Afterwards he only learned medicine and martial art, so it could be said that his writing skill was superficial. "If Miss wants me to write," he said, "That is the same as requesting my death. My late father departed too early; I haven't learned anything from my father. I am really ashamed."

While they were talking the Manor servants had already served tea. They noticed that inside the sky blue porcelain cups there were green and tender Longjing [city in Jilin] tea leaves floating around. A delicate fragrant greeted their nostrils. The warriors felt strange; this place was separated thousands of 'li's from Jiangnan, how could there be fresh

Longjing tea leaves? In all aspects this Miss carried a mysterious aura around her.

Zhao Min was the first to take the cup with both hands and took a sip before inviting everybody else to do the same. She said, "You have journeyed far, our village is simple and slow, so please forgive our lack of hospitality. Everybody please follow me to have some refreshments." She stood up and led them passed a porch and a courtyard, toward a big garden. This garden was littered with unadorned mountain rocks and a plain creek pond in the middle; there were not too many flowers and plants, but the overall impression was elegance. Zhang Wuji did not have deep understanding of landscape architecture, but Yang Xiao silently nodded his head in approval. He thought the master of the garden was certainly not an uncouth person; inwardly he was full of admiration.

In the pavilion in the middle of the pond two banquet tables had already been prepared. Zhao Min invited Zhang Wuji and his entourage to take a seat. Zhao Yishang, Qian Erbai and the other Divine Archer Eight Heroes took the rest of the Ming Cult people to have their meals at another hall on the side. Yin Liting was unable to get up, so Yang Buhui attended to him in yet another room.

Zhao Min poured a big bowl of wine and took it in one gulp; she said, "This is the eighteen years old 'nu zhen chen' [old chaste maiden (or spinster)] wine from Shaoxing; please take a taste and tell me what you think?"

Although Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others truly believed that this Miss was a young generation chivalrous heroine, they were still very careful. They looked at the wine pot and the wine cups and did not see anything unusual; besides, Miss Zhao had taken the first cup, so they

chased their suspicion away and ate and drank with ease of mind.

Ming Cult originally had a religious rule so-called 'shi² cai⁴ shi⁴ mo²' [meat dish are a matter of the devil]; prohibiting them to consume alcohol and meat. But after their altar was moved to the Mount Kunlun this prohibition against alcohol and meat was removed. In the Western Region fresh vegetables were hard to come by; they were more expensive than meat. Plus the climate was bitter cold; without cattle and sheep fat it was difficult to fight the cold using internal energy alone.

Around the pavilion, on the bank of the pond, there were seven, eight flower trees; they looked like 'shui xian' [lit. water deity; narcissus?] but not as big. The flowers were white; the fragrance was light and elegant. So close to this refreshing fragrance, drinking the good wine, the gentle breeze carried the flower scent; the warriors' hearts were really carefree. That Miss Zhao was really cordial, she was very knowledgeable of stories and news of the Wulin world of the Central Plains; many of those were not known even to Yin Tianzheng father and son. Toward Shaolin, Emei, Kunlun, and the other sects' martial arts she did not say too much, but she placed the highest regards toward Zhang Sanfeng and the Wudang Seven Heroes. She also heaped praises toward Ming Cult's leaders' martial art. She was seemingly talking without giving it too much thought; but each praise and every admiration were right on target. The guests were delighted and full of admiration toward her; but when asked which martial art school she belongs to, Zhao Min only smiled without giving any answer, and then she changed the topic.

The wine had gone several rounds. Zhao Min always drank her cup dry. She was very open-minded. Every time a new

dish arrive, she always moved her chopsticks and be the first to eat the dish. Her face was starting to exude a reddish glow from the wine; she looked even more beautiful. A beautiful woman would either be refined and elegant, or tender and glamorous; but this Miss Zhao, in her extreme beauty she also carried a third part boldness, a third part heroic attitude, while maintained her elegance. Plus, she also carried an air of authority, which gained other people's respect and made them not dare to stare at her intently.

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, our Ming Cult is most grateful for your hospitality. I have a question I'd like to ask, but I do not dare to utter it."

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhao Min replied, "Why are you acting like you are an outsider? Isn't there a saying in the Jianghu world, 'within four sides of the ocean, everybody is a brother'? If you do not think I am unworthy, just consider 'xiao mei' [little sister, she was referring to herself] your friend. Whatever it is you want to know, I will do my best to answer it."

Zhang Wuji said, "If that is the case, then I'd like to ask: where did Miss acquire this Yitian Sword from?"

Zhao Min showed a faint smile; she loosened the Yitian Sword from her waist and placed it on the table. "Ever since Xiao Mei met with all of you, your eyes have never left this sword. I wonder if you care to tell me the reason behind it."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Frankly, this sword originally belonged to Mie Jue Shitai, the Sect Leader of Emei Sect. The number of my brethrens from the Ming Cult who perished under this sword was not a few. Even I almost died from this sword's stab on my chest. That was the reason we pay a close attention to this sword."

“Zhang Jiaozhu’s divine ability is matchless,” Zhao Min said, “I heard by using ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ you were able to snatch this sword from Mie Jue Shitai’s hand. How could you be injured by this sword? I also heard the one injured Zhang Jiaoshu with this sword was a young female disciple of the Emei Sect; her martial art was only so-so. Xiao Mei really does not understand why it happened.” With raised eyebrows she looked at Zhang Wuji’s face intently; her mouth showed a faint smile, yet she was not smiling.

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely. “How did she know this clearly?” he thought. He said “the other side came too suddenly, I was not paying attention and let it slip.”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “That Zhou Zhiruo, Zhou Jiejie [older sister Zhou] is very beautiful, is she not?”

Zhang Wuji blushed even redder, “Miss is teasing me,” he said. He picked up the wine cup with both hands, trying to drink it in one gulp to hide his embarrassment, but unexpectedly his left hand slightly trembled and he spilled a few drops of wine on the sleeve of his clothes.

Zhao Min smiled and said, “Xiao Mei cannot bear the wine power, I am afraid if I drink some more I will breach the etiquette; I wouldn’t know the seriousness of what comes out of my mouth. I am going inside to change my clothes and will be back right away. Please all of you continue eating and drinking, no need to be polite.” She stood up, cupped her fists, turned around and went out of the pavilion, and disappeared beyond the willow and flower trees on the other side of the pond. The Yitian sword was left lying on the table, she did not take it with her. The Manor servants continuously served food and wine.

The Ming Cult people stopped eating. They waited for quite a long time but Zhao Min had not returned. Zhou Dian said, "She left her precious sword here, obviously she trusts us." While speaking he lifted up the sword with one hand. "Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed, "How come it is so light?" Grabbing the hilt he drew the sword from its sheathe. Everybody rose up from their seats in astonishment. Where is the Yitian sword, which could cut metal and slice jade, with its matchless sharpness? The sword in Zhou Dian's hand was just a wooden sword. Immediately everybody smelt a faint incense-like fragrance, and saw that the sword's blade was light yellow, for the sword was made of sandalwood.

For a moment Zhou Dian was at a loss; pushing the sword back to its sheathe he mumbled, "Yang ... Left Emissary Yang, this ... what kind of trick is this?" Although he loved to argue with Yang Xiao daily, but actually deep down in his heart he admired Yang Xiao's vast knowledge and experience. This time facing a mystery he could not help but asking Yang Xiao for direction.

Yang Xiao's face was serious, in a low voice he said, "Jiaozhu, I am 90% sure that this Miss Zhao harbors ill intention. This moment we are in danger, I think we'd better leave as soon as we can."

"Why would we be afraid of her?" Zhou Dian asked, "We are numerous. Even if she is making her move, do you think she can eradicate us completely?"

Yang Xiao said, "Since entering this Green Willow Manor everywhere I looked I felt something strange. It feels right yet not exactly right; it feels wrong yet not exactly wrong. I can't pinpoint what it is. Why should we stay in this place? We don't have any specific reason anyway."

“What the Left Emissary Yang said is right,” Zhang Wuji nodded his head, “We have had our meals; it’s time for us to leave.” Then he stood up.

Tie guan dao ren [the Iron Hat Taoist Priest] said, “What about the Yitian Sword? Aren’t you going to inquire, Jiaozhu?”

Peng Yingyu said, “In my humble opinion, this Miss Zhao has a suspicious intention; she won’t stop until she reached her goal. Even if we don’t look for her; she will definitely look for us.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “We have our own tasks to accomplish, there is no need to seek a new burden. We’ll wait for the enemy to exhaust himself; we’ll talk about it once we understand more.”

Everybody left the pavilion on the pond; returning to the main hall they told the servant to notify the lady that they were grateful for the feast and it was time for them to leave.

Zhao Min came out in a hurry; she was wearing a light yellow silk gown. She looked natural yet elegant; her glowing countenance was stunningly beautiful. “We have just met, why are you leaving?” she asked, “Is it because ‘xiao nuzi’s hospitality is too simple and slow?”

Zhang Wuji said, “We are very grateful over Miss’ hospitality, how could you say ‘simple and slow’? We have businesses to attend and cannot tarry too long. We’ll meet again someday and we’ll ask for more of your advice.”

The corner of Zhao Min’s mouth showed a faint smile, yet she was not smiling. She sent the guests off the village. The Divine Archers Eight Heroes stood on the either side of the

road, bowing respectfully to send the guests off. The Ming Cult people cupped their fists, and without saying anything sped away. As they left the Green Willow Manor on all directions they saw open field, with nobody in sight.

Zhou Dian loudly said, "This Miss Zhao does not necessarily harbor ill intentions to us. Perhaps she was just playing a joke to Jiaozhu with that wooden sword. Even if that little girl wants to create trouble, what could she do? Left Emissary Yang, this time you were wrong!"

Yang Xiao hesitated before answering, "Whatever it is, I can't say; but I feel uncomfortable."

Zhou Dian laughed and said, "After the battle of the Brightness Peak the famous Left Emissary Yang has turned into a coward ... Aiyo!" He swayed and fell from his horse.

Shuo Bude was the closest to him; he busily jumped down his horse to help Zhou Dian up. "Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou], what happened?" he asked.

Zhou Dian laughed and said, "No ... nothing. I guess I drank too much wine so I am dizzy now."

As the word 'dizzy' came out of his mouth, everybody looked at each other. Turned out as they sped way from the Green Willow Manor, everybody felt slight dizziness. Only they thought it was because of the wine, so they did not give it too much thought. But not only Zhou Dian's martial art skill was high, his drinking capacity was also strong; how could a few bowls of wine make him so dizzy that he fell down from his horse? Surely something was amiss.

Zhang Wuji looked up and tried to remember Wang Nangu's Book of Poison, which poison was colorless, tasteless and

odorless; but could make people dizzy. He could not think of anything. But he ate and drank the same dishes and the same wine, yet why did he not feel anything different? Suddenly something flashed in his mind like a lightning bolt; he remembered something and was extremely shocked. He shouted, "Everybody who ate at the pavilion on the pond, get down from your horses and sit down cross-legged; right now! Whatever happened, do not circulate your 'qi' [breathing, in term of internal energy cultivation]." He also issued an order, "Brothers of Five-Element Flags and Heavenly Eagle Flag, spread out to all directions and encircle the leaders. Whoever is trying to get near can be immediately killed!"

Hearing their Cult Leader issued a strict order everybody replied it loud voice. They stood up, unsheathing their weapons and moved into position. Zhang Wuji ordered, "Do not leave your position until I come back!"

The leaders were confused; they only felt slightly dizzy, certainly nothing else seemed unusual, why was the Cult Leader so alarmed? Zhang Wuji warned again, "No matter how uncomfortable you are, do not fight it with your inner strength; otherwise the poison will be difficult to neutralize."

The leaders were startled, "How can we be poisoned?"

Zhang Wuji's shadow swayed and in a blink of the eye he had already fled more than a dozen 'zhang's away. He felt horse would be too slow, so utilizing his 'qing gong' to the fullest he flew back to the Green Willow Manor.

He was very anxious, knowing the extent of the poison attack on Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others. The poison would not flare-up in three quarters or an hour; but it was not like the 'xuan yin zhi' [black/mysterious finger,

Xuan Yin Finger in Chapter 22], in which the treatment could be delayed for a long time. If he could not find the antidote soon, these people's lives would be in danger.

He flew over these twenty 'li's or so in a short moment. As he arrived at the Manor gate, he flew up like an arrow. The gate guards did not even see anybody entering the Manor, only a blur of a shadow. Zhang Wuji went straight to the garden in the back, towards the pavilion in the middle of the pond. He saw a lady wearing a light green silk gown; her left hand holding a cup, a book in her right hand, sitting quietly, reading a book and drinking tea. It was none other than Zhao Min. This time she was wearing female clothing. Upon hearing the sound of Zhang Wuji's footsteps she turned her head around and gave a faint smile.

"Miss Zhao, I need some flowers and grass from you," Zhang Wuji said. Without waiting for her to reply, his left foot kicked and he jumped from the pond bank to the pavilion in the middle of the pond. His body floated above the water like a dragonfly; while with his hands he pulled the seven, eight narcissus-like flower trees. As he landed on the pavilion, he heard several 'swish, swish' sounds, several tiny secret projectiles flew toward his face.

Zhang Wuji flicked his right hand and rolled the secret projectiles inside his sleeve. His left sleeve brushed away toward Zhao Min; Zhao Min slanted sideways to evade, only to hear a whistling sound. The gust of wind from the sleeve blew away everything on the table: teapot, teacup, fruit dish and everything else flew across the pond and shattered into pieces as they struck the flower trees on the other side.

Zhang Wuji stood up straight; he examined at the flower trees in his hand, and saw that each tree had a deep purple long root, and on these roots grew small beads the size of

pearls, dark green like jadeite. He was delighted since he knew he had found the antidote; he put the roots in his pocket. "Thank you so much for the antidote, I am taking my leave now!" he said.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Easy to come, but difficult to leave!" Tossing her book aside she drew a pair of paper-thin and frost-white daggers from the book; and thrust the daggers forward.

Zhang Wuji was concerned about Yin Tianzheng and the others' injuries, he was not willing to prolong the contact. His right sleeve brushed away and dozens of golden needles in his sleeve shot out toward her. Zhao Min evaded sideways and flew out of the pavilion. Her right foot stepped on the stairs and immediately she flew back in; dozens of golden needles fell into the water.

"Good movement!" Zhang Wuji praised. He saw her left hand in front of her body and her right hand behind, both daggers came slanting down on him. He thought, "This little girl's heart is so poisonous. If I did not know the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [the internal energy cultivated from the Nine Yang Manual] and did not read Wang Nangu's Book of Poison, today the Ming Cult would have fallen under her hand without knowing anything." Both of his hands reached out to grab her hands and snatch the daggers away.

Zhao Min's white wrist flipped suddenly, her pair of daggers swift as lightning slashed his fingers. Zhang Wuji did not exert his energy in this move, he was inwardly groaning. But his internal energy was profound, in reflex his fingers moved and although he failed in snatching the dagger away, he managed to strike the acupoints on her wrists. Once again she flicked her wrists and the daggers flew out from her hands. Zhang Wuji leaned his head sideways to evade.

‘Bang, bang!’ The daggers struck the pavilion’s wooden pillar with such a force that they stuck on the wood and vibrated continuously.

Zhang Wuji was stunned; speaking about martial art skill, she could not be compared to Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao and the others, but in term of alertness and quick-thinking, her reflex was very fast. Even though her daggers repeatedly missed their target, they would have been able to injure the opponent in the end. If early on he erroneously thought that he managed to disarm her and was not moving quick enough, then his life would have been gone by now. As the pair of daggers flew out of her hands, Zhao Min’s right wrist flipped again and she quickly snatched the wooden Yitian Sword from the table. She thrust the sword, still inside its sheath, toward Zhang Wuji’s waist, without drawing the sword out.

Using two of his left hand fingers Zhang Wuji attacked the ‘jian zhen xue’ [shoulder chaste acupoint] on her left shoulder. As Zhao Min leaned her head sideways to evade, his right hand stretched out, using a marvelous movement from ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ he snatched the wooden sword.

Zhao Min withdrew to the steps; she laughed softly and said, “Master Zhang, what kind of martial art was that? Was it ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ divine skill? I think there is nothing special about it.”

Zhang Wuji opened up his left palm; revealing a pearl head ornament still gently shaking. It was the head ornament Zhao Min wore on the side of her head. Zhao Min’s face changed slightly; Zhang Wuji was able to snatch the hair ornament on her temple without her feeling anything. If when taking the ornament he slightly touched the left hand ‘tai yang xue’ [sun acupoint] on her head, then her little life

would have been gone. But she was quick to think and she smiled. "If you like that pearl flower, then I'll gladly give it to you; you don't have to snatch it away from me," she said.

Zhang Wuji was slightly embarrassed by her words; his left hand waved, tossing the pearl ornament back to her. "I'll return it to you!" he said. Turning his body he was about to leave the pavilion.

Zhao Min held out her hand to take the head ornament. "Wait a minute!" she called out.

Zhang Wuji turned around. "Why did you steal two of the biggest pearls?" she said with a smile.

"You are talking nonsense, I don't have time to joke around with you," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min lifted the head ornament high and with a stern voice said, "Look here, aren't two of the pearls missing?"

Zhang Wuji shot a glance and he noticed two golden threads without any pearl on them. He knew she must have had taken those pearls herself; she wanted to lure him to come back so that she could carry out some other dirty trick. "Humph," he snorted, ignoring her.

Zhao Min pressed the edge of the table with her hand and sternly said, "Zhang Wuji, I dare you to come within three steps of me."

Zhang Wuji was not fazed by her intimidation, he said, "It's up to you if you say that I am a coward who fears death." While talking he had already taken two steps down the stairs.

Seeing none of her tricks worked, Zhao Min's beautiful face changed; with a miserable voice she cried out, "It's over! It's over! I am defeated, how could I still have a face to see my Shifu?" Reaching back she pulled one of the dagger stuck on the pillar. "Zhang Jiaozhu," she called out, "Thank you for your help!"

Zhang Wuji turned his head around only to see a flash of white light; she thrust the dagger into her own chest. Zhang Wuji laughed coldly, "I won't fall ..." he had not finished whatever he wanted to say when he saw the dagger enter her chest. She cried out miserably and fell on the edge of the table.

To say that Zhang Wuji was extremely shocked would not be an overstatement; he did not expect her to be so hard-headed that she committed suicide just because she failed to overcome him. He thought that as long as the dagger did not strike her heart, he might still be able to save her. Hence he turned around to examine her wound.

He walked to within three steps of the table and was going to reach out to pull her shoulder when suddenly his foot stepped on empty air; his body dropped vertically down. While groaning inwardly he flicked both of his sleeves, so that his drop was slightly halted. In the meantime his palm struck the edge of the table. If his palm struck its target, then he could borrow the momentum to leap out from this trap. Who would have thought that Zhao Min's suicide was a fake; she had already anticipated his action. Sending her strength to her right palm she managed to block his palm from reaching the table.

This 'rabbit-rose-up-falcon-fall-down' exchange happened in a blink of the eye; by the time two palms met, Zhang Wuji's body had dropped half of his height. Flipping his hand over

he tried to grab four of Zhao Min's fingers. But her fingers were slippery, they immediately slipped away from his grab. Yet within this fraction of a second Zhang Wuji exerted his strength - taking the opportunity as their fingers touched- to reach out to grab Zhao Min's upper arm. Only the force of his falling down was too great; as soon as he pulled, the two of them fell together.

All of a sudden darkness enveloped them; they kept falling, but heard the slam of the trap door close above their heads. The trap was about four, five 'zhang's [about 12 - 15 meters or 40 - 50 feet]. As his feet touched the bottom immediately Zhang Wuji leaped up, using 'bi hu you qiang gong' [gecko roaming the wall skill] to the fullest he crawled along the trap wall to the top, trying to push the trap door open. His hand touched something icy cold; turned out the door was made of a giant iron panel, reinforced by some kind of contraption to hold it firmly on its place. Although he had the divine strength of 'qian kun da nuo yi', but his body was suspended in midair; he did not have a strong foundation, unlike if he were standing on the ground. As he pushed, the iron panel did not move even so slightly, while he fell back down to the bottom.

Zhao Min chuckled and said, "The door is reinforced with eight thick steel bars; you are pushing it from below. Although your strength is exceptional, how can you push it open?"

Zhang Wuji was mad at her treachery; ignoring her remarks he groped around the four walls, trying to find a way out. Unfortunately the walls were all icy cold and extremely smooth and hard.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Master Zhang, your Gecko Roaming the Wall is excellent. These walls were made of

pure cast steel, they were polished and very slippery; not a single crack exists, yet you were able to crawl along the wall. Hee .. hee ... heh ... heh ...!"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "You are with me in this trap together, what's so funny?" Suddenly he remembered, "This girl is very crafty. There must be a way out of this trap. I can't let her escape alone." He moved forward two steps and grabbed her hand.

Zhao Min was frightened. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Don't ever think of escaping alone," Zhang Wuji replied, "If you want to live, you should open the trap door quickly."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Why worry? We won't starve to death in here. If they cannot find me, they will let us out. The worse case is if my men think I am going out of the Manor; then that would be too bad."

"Is there any secret mechanism to get us out of this trap?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min laughed. "You don't look like an idiot, how come you asked such a stupid question?" she said, "This trap was not built to amuse ourselves. It was to trap an enemy inside; why would we provide a secret mechanism for the enemy to escape?"

Zhang Wuji thought what she said was reasonable. He asked, "There are people falling into the trap; how come nobody outside knows? Hurry up and call someone to open the door."

"All my men are on assignments outside. You saw a moment ago there was nobody else in the pavilion, did you not?"

Zhao Min said, "They will come back by this time tomorrow. Just be patient; take a rest for a moment. You have just had your meal; certainly you are not hungry, are you?"

Zhang Wuji was angry; he thought, "I have no problem staying for a while, but how can I save (Maternal) Grandfather and the others?" Thereupon tightening his grip with 20% of his strength he roared, "If you don't let me out, I am going to kill you first and talk later!"

Zhao Min smiled and replied, "If you kill me, then you can forget about getting out of this trap forever. Hey, men and women are not supposed to be intimate; why are you holding my hand?"

Hearing her words Zhang Wuji immediately released her hand and withdrew two steps; and then he sat down with his back against the wall. This steel trap's perimeter was only several feet; even when he tried to sit as far as possible from her, their distance could not be more than one step. He was anxious and angry at the same time. He could smell her breath, and the sweet fragrance of her perfume; he could not help but feeling agitated. Finally he stood up and angrily said, "Our Ming Cult people and you are not acquainted with each other; we did not have either resentment or enmity. Why did you deliberately plan to put us all to death?"

Zhao Min replied, "Things that you don't understand are too many; but since you asked, let me explain it to you. Do you know who I am?"

Zhang Wuji did not think it was a good idea; he wanted to know this young girl's origin and her true intentions, but if he had to wait for her to tell her story in its entirety, then Yin Tianzheng and the others might be dead because of the poison. Also, how would he know whether she would tell a lie

or not; if she fabricated a lie and told him a whole bunch of nonsense, then he would be stuck in that trap for a long time. His sole purpose right now was to force her to open up the trap door; therefore, he cut her off by saying, "I don't know who you are, and right now I don't have time to listen to your story. Are you or are you not going to call somebody to open the door for me?"

"I can't call anybody," Zhao Min replied, "Even if I shout as loud as possible down here, people above won't be able to hear. If you don't believe me, just give it a try."

Zhang Wuji was really angry; his left hand reached out and grabbed her arm. Zhao Min cried out in fear and tried to move her hands to fend off; but early on her acupoints had been sealed so she could not move. Zhang Wuji's left hand choked her throat; he said, "If I exert a little bit more strength, your life will be gone."

By now those two stood very close to each other; he could feel her hurried breathing, it smelt like orchid. Zhang Wuji looked up to give some distance away between his face and hers. Zhao Min suddenly broke up in tears; choking and sobbing she said, "You bully me, you bully me!"

Zhang Wuji did not expect this turn of events; he was startled. Releasing his left hand he said, "I don't want to bully you, I only want you to let me out."

Still crying Zhao Min said, "It's not that I don't want to. All right; I'll call!" Raising her voice she shouted, "Hey, hey! Come here! Open the door, I fall into the steel trap!" She called out for a while, but nothing astir overhead. Zhao Min said with a smile, "You see? It's useless."

Zhang Wuji's anger had reached the top; "Shameless! Crying and laughing. What kind of person are you?" he said.

“You are the shameless one!” Zhao Min shot back, “A big man like you bullying a weak girl like me.”

“You, a weak girl?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You are so crafty that even ten grown men are not your match.”

“Thank you for your praise, Zhang Da Jiaozhu [Big Cult Leader Zhang]!” Zhao Min laughed, “Little girl does not dare to accept.”

Zhang Wuji thought the situation was getting urgent; if he did not make a drastic move, the Ming Cult people would be annihilated. Gritting his teeth he reached out and with a scoff he tore a piece of Zhao Min’s skirt.

Zhao Min thought he suddenly had an evil intention; finally she was really scared. “You ... what are you doing?” she called out.

Zhang Wuji said, “If you decide to let me go, just nod your head.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji ignored her question. He spat his saliva on that piece of silk cloth to make it wet. “Please forgive me,” he said, “I don’t have any choice.” Immediately he sealed up her nose and mouth with that wet cloth.

Zhao Min could not breathe; a short moment later she felt her chest constricted, she felt utterly miserable. Unexpectedly she was so unyielding and did not want to nod her head at all; after a while her body slumped and she passed out.

Zhang Wuji took her wrist to examine her pulse; he felt her pulse to be weak. Immediately he took away the wet cloth covering her nose and mouth. After half a day Zhao Min slowly regained her consciousness; she moaned lightly.

“It didn’t feel good, did it?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Now, are you or are you not going to let me go?”

Zhao Min hatefully said, “Even if I have to faint a hundred times I still won’t let you go. You’d better just kill me.” Swiping her mouth with her hand she spat several times and said, “Your spittle! Pei! It stank to the high heaven!”

Seeing her hard-heartedness Zhang Wuji was temporarily at a loss. After remaining in this stalemate situation for some time, he was getting more anxious than ever. Finally he said, “In order to save everybody’s life I have to play rough. I apologize for being inappropriate.” Grabbing her left foot he tore away her shoe and sock.

Zhao Min was both angry and scared. “Stinky boy, what are you doing?” she asked.

Zhang Wuji did not answer. He grabbed her right foot and also took her shoe and sock away. With both hands extended he touched the ‘yong quan xue’ [bubbling spring acupoint] on the bottom of her feet; then he transmitted heat toward these acupoints using the Nine Yang Divine Energy.

This ‘yong quan xue’ was located at the center of the crook of the foot; it was the end of the ‘zu shao yin shen jing’ [foot’s ‘little yin’ kidney passage], thus it was very sensitive to the touch. Zhang Wuji was very proficient in medical science, hence his knowledge was profound. When children play, they used to tickle their friend’s foot; making their body tingled from the sensation. This time he transmitted

the warm Nine Yang Divine Energy into her ‘yong quan xue’; the sensation was a hundred times more difficult to bear than if she was tickled using feather or soft plume. At first Zhao Min could not help but broke up in laughter. She wanted to pull her foot away, but her acupoints were sealed; how could she move away? Later on she felt discomfort more painful than if she were cut with blade or flogged with a whip. She felt like millions of fleas were creeping and crawling in her internal organs; nipping and gnawing at her bone marrow and blood veins. Her voice became hoarse from laughing, and gradually her laughter turned into crying.

Zhang Wuji hardened his heart; he ignored her crying and continued his torture. Zhao Min felt like her heart nearly jumped out from her chest; she felt like the hairs on her body fell off from their roots because of the itch. “Stinky kid ... Thief ...” she cursed, “One day, I ... I will cut you ... to thousand pieces. All right, all right ... mercy ... have mercy on me ... Zhang ... Master Zhang ... Zhang Jiao ... Jiaozhu ... Boohooohoo ... boohooohoo ...”

“Are you or are you not going to let me go?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Sobbing Zhao Min replied, “I ... I’ll let you go. Stop ... stop it!”

At last Zhang Wuji let his hand go and said, “Please forgive my offense!” He rubbed her back and unsealed her acupoints.

Zhao Min gasped for breath before scolding him, “Thief, give me back my shoes and socks!”

Zhang Wuji took the sock and grabbed her left foot. When

he tortured her just a moment ago, he did not have any other thought in his mind; but now as soon as he touched her warm and soft foot his heart was beating faster. Zhao Min pulled her foot; she felt an unspeakable shyness so her face was blushing. Luckily in that darkness Wuji could not see her face. Silently she put her shoes and socks back on. A strange feeling crept into her heart; suddenly she wanted him to touch her foot again.

“Quick, hurry up!” suddenly she heard Zhang Wuji’s stern voice, “Let me go!”

Without saying anything Zhao Min stretched out her hand to trace a circle engraved on the steel wall, and then with the end of her dagger’s hilt she rapped the center of the circle seven, eight times; sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes long, sometimes short. As soon as she stopped a crashing noise was heard, a bright light came down as the trap door opened. The circle on the steel wall was actually connected to the outside by a narrow tube. The people outside immediately opened the door as she knocked the wall in a previously agreed pattern.

Zhang Wuji did not expect her to open the door as soon as she said so; he could not help but feel surprised. “Let’s go!” he said.

Zhao Min hung her head low; she stood on the side without making any noise. Zhang Wuji remembered she was only a young girl and he had repeatedly tortured her; he felt sorry. He bowed and said, “Miss Zhao, just now I did not have any other choice. Please accept my most sincere apology.”

Zhao Min turned her head toward the wall; her shoulder slightly trembled as if she was sobbing. She was very crafty and ruthless; when he was engaged in a fierce battle of wits with her, Zhang Wuji did not have any distracting thoughts.

But now he was overwhelmed with guilt; especially looking at her graceful and elegant, slender back, the skin on the back of her neck white as jade, her beautiful and fluffy hair. With pity and regret in his heart he said, "Miss Zhao, I am leaving. Old Zhang has offended you."

Zhao Min's back moved slightly, but she still was not willing to turn her head. Zhang Wuji did not dare to tarry much longer; using the 'bi hu you qiang gong' he crept upward. When he was about a 'zhang' away from the trap door, his right foot kicked the steel wall and he flew out of the trap, while sweeping his sleeve away to protect his head and face for fear somebody set up an ambush by the trap door. Before his feet even touched the ground he swept his gaze around, but did not see a single soul in the pavilion. Without wasting a single second he leaped over the outer wall and rushed along the trail towards the place where the Ming Cult leaders took a rest.

By this time the sun was setting behind the mountains; he had been delayed for more than an hour inside the trap, without knowing Yin Tianzheng and the others' condition. With an anxious heart he ran faster and not too long afterwards he was not too far away from his destination. His heart skipped a beat because he saw a large group of Mongolian cavalry charging forward; surrounding the Ming Cult people, shooting arrow after arrow.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Our Cult leaders are poisoned, nobody gives orders; how can we withstand the enemy's besieging?" He picked up speed and rushed forward.

When he got closer he heard a clear female voice from among the crowd calling out, "Sharp Metal Flag attack to the northeast, Flooding Water Flag outflank the southwest." It was Xiao Zhao's voice. Just as her voice trailed off, a group

of the Ming Cult people under a white flag came out, charging toward the northeast. Another group under a black flag outflanked toward the southwest. The Yuan soldiers divided themselves to engage the enemy. Suddenly the yellow flag of Thick Earth and the green flag of Gigantic Wood came out from among the Ming Cult people like a yellow dragon and a green dragon shoulder to shoulder attacking the enemy. The Yuan soldiers were thrown into confusion and were forced to retreat.

With several leaps Zhang Wuji arrived in front of the Ming Cult people. As they saw their Cult Leader came back, they burst out in cheers and their spirit was greatly aroused. Zhang Wuji saw Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Zhou Dian and the others, as well as the Five Elements Flags commanders and their second-in-commands, were still sitting cross-legged on the ground. Xiao Zhao, holding a small flag in her hand, was standing on a mound, commanding the Ming Cult people to defend against the enemy.

Actually, everybody in the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag was a warrior with excellent martial art skill; only their leaders were poisoned that they were in disorder. As soon as Xiao Zhao arranged the defense line according to the Eight Diagram the Yuan soldiers actually could not penetrate their defense for a long time.

“Master Zhang,” Xiao Zhao happily called out, “Come and assume the command.”

“I can’t,” Zhang Wuji replied, “You can command better. Let me kill some officers first.”

With ‘swish, swish’ sound several arrows came toward him. Zhang Wuji grabbed a lance from among the Ming Cult people and struck the incoming arrows one by one to the

ground. Raising his arm he hurled the lance like an arrow penetrating a 'bai fu zhang's [leader of a 100 men unit] chest, nailing him to the ground. The Yuan soldiers cried out in alarm and withdrew several dozens of steps.

Suddenly they heard a bugle sound; about a dozen riders came fast. Zhang Wuji saw the ones in the front were Zhao Min's Eight Divine Archers. He creased his brows and said in his heart, "These eight people's shooting skill is too strong. If they attack I am afraid the damage to my brethren will not be small. I'll have to attack first!" But he saw the leader of the Eight Divine Archers, Zhao Yishang, wave a short golden dragon-head staff and called out, "Master's order: withdraw troops immediately."

The commander of the Yuan troops, a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit], shouted some Mongolian words. The Yuan soldiers turned their horses around and galloped away. Qian Erbai dismounted his horse. Holding a tray in his hands he walked toward Zhang Wuji, bowed down and said, "My Master is asking Jiaozhu to accept this as a souvenir."

Zhang Wuji saw yellow brocade spread out on the tray; on the brocade was a small exquisitely carved golden case. He was not afraid of any crafty trick; holding out his hand he took the box. Qian Erbai bowed in respect, walked backward three steps, turned around to mount his horse and galloped away.

Zhang Wuji handed over the golden case to Xiao Zhao. He was very concerned over his people's condition that he did not care to look what was inside the case. Immediately he took the flower tree from his pocket and gave an order for someone to fetch some clear water. He crushed the deep purple root along with the dark green small beads and put them in the water. One by one he gave the concoction to Yin

Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, as well as to the Five Elements Flags commanders and their second-in-commands. Practically every one of the Ming Cult leaders who joined the banquet at the pavilion, except Zhang Wuji who was protected by the Nine Yang Divine Energy, was poisoned.

Yang Buhui accompanied Yin Liting outside the pavilion; Xiao Zhao and the rest of the Ming Cult people ate at the side reception hall. Everybody followed their Cult Leader's order; every dish was quietly tested with silver needles before they ate it; hence they were free from poisoning.

The antidote was very effective that in less than an hour the toxicity inside their bodies was neutralized; they no longer feeling dizzy, only they were still feeling very weak. Immediately they asked the whole story on how they got poisoned.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "We were being very careful; the water, wine and the food did not have any poison. I am sure about it. How would I know that that Miss Zhao's evil mind was very cunning that she employed an unthinkable method? This kind of 'shui xian'-like flower is called 'zui xian ling fu' [drunken immortal phantom lotus]. It is extremely rare but in itself it is not poisonous. The fake Yitian sword was made of a 'qi ling xiang mu' [marvelous pangolin fragrant wood], which grows on the ocean floor. In itself it is also not poisonous. But if these two fragrances are mixed together, they become violently poisonous."

Zhou Dian slapped his thigh, "It was my bad; who told me to have an itchy hand and pull that Yitian sword out to take a look at it? Damn it!"

Zhang Wuji said, "She had already planned to harm us; even if Zhou Xiong did not pull it out, she would have sent

someone else to draw it out and poison us. It was unavoidable.”

“Come!” Zhou Dian said, “Let us burn that Green Willow Manor to the ground!”

He barely closed his mouth when in the distant they saw black smoke rose up to the sky, red flame flickered; the Green Willow Manor was on fire. They looked at each other, dumbstruck; everybody had the same thought, “This Miss Zhao has anticipated everything; she knew that as soon as the poison in our bodies is neutralized we will settle the debt by burning the manor, so she beat us by setting the manor on fire first. This person is young, she is also a girl, yet she is a formidable enemy.”

Zhou Dian slapped his thigh, “She burned the manor, so what? We can still catch up and kill them all.”

Yang Xiao said, “Since she had already burned the manor, she must have prepared everything. We may not necessarily be able to pursue them.”

“Yang Xiong,” Zhou Dian said, “Your martial art is not bad, but when it comes to scheming, you beat Zhou Dian by half a notch.”

Yang Xiao laughed and said, “I wouldn’t dare, I wouldn’t dare! Zhou Xiong’s strategic ability is divine; how can Little Brother match it?”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “You two don’t need to be modest. This time we do not suffer too much damage, except for thirteen, fourteen brothers who suffer some arrow wound; we should thank our lucky stars. Let’s continue our journey.”

Along the way they asked Zhang Wuji how he knew the cause of their poisoning. Zhang Wuji replied, "I remember in the Poison Manual there is an article: If the fragrance of the 'qi ling xiang mu' is mixed with that of some kind of lotus flower, the resulting mixture oftentimes can cause someone to become intoxicated for a few days. It can be neutralized by drinking the mixture of the beads of the flower with water. If the poison is not dispelled immediately, the toxicity will greatly damage the heart and the lung. This 'zui xian ling fu' is several times more severe than regular lotus. That was the reason I asked everybody not to circulate your internal energy. Otherwise the fragrance would have entered all passages and pulses, and then your life would be in danger."

Wei Yixiao said, "I am surprised that this little girl Xiao Zhao has rendered a great service today; if it wasn't for her bravely stepped forward in critical situation, our casualty would be very heavy."

Initially Yang Xiao believed that Xiao Zhao was the enemy's spy; but her actions that day could be considered a great service to the Ming Cult. It was so totally beyond his anticipation that for the time being he did not know what to think.

Along the way they tried to guess Zhao Min's origin, but nobody was able to offer a plausible explanation. Zhang Wuji did not tell anybody that they fell into the trap together, and that he touched her feet, ripped her skirt, and the circumstances surrounding that occasion. Although he felt that he did not do anything shameful, he still didn't feel comfortable talking about it in public.

That evening they decided to stop by an inn a little bit early.

The rest of the Ming Cult people went their separate ways to find temples and ancestral halls to spend the night. Xiao Zhao took some water to Zhang Wuji's room for him to wash his face.

"Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "Today you have rendered a great service; you don't have to act as my servant anymore."

Xiao Zhao flashed one of her captivating smiles. "I am very happy to attend to your needs; what servant are you talking about?" After waiting for him to wash his hands and face; she took the golden case out and said, "I wonder what kind of poisonous bugs or secret projectiles are in this box?"

"Right," Zhang Wuji said, "We have to be very careful."

Placing the case on the table he pulled her away from it. Taking out a copper coin he tossed it away. 'Ding!' the coin hit the edge of the golden case and opened up its lid. Nothing strange happened. He came near to take a look. Inside the box was a pearl head ornament; it still vibrated lightly. It was precisely the head ornament he took from Zhao Min's temples, except the two big pearls, which Zhao Min said were missing, were back on their golden stems. Zhang Wuji was taken aback; he could not guess Zhao Min's real intention in doing this.

Xiao Zhao smiled and said, "Master, that Miss Zhao is very good to you, she sent somebody to deliver this precious pearl head ornament to you."

Zhang Wuji said, "I am a man, what am I supposed to do with this kind of girl's jewelry? Xiao Zhao, you can keep it."

Xiao Zhao shook her hand; she laughed and said, "How can

I? Others show their affection to you; how do I dare to take it?"

With three of his left hand fingers Zhang Wuji took the pearl ornament. "Catch!" he laughed, and tossed the ornament away. His strength was neither light nor heavy; the ornament landed on Xiao Zhao's hair without the golden pin scratching her skin.

Xiao Zhao reached up to take it away, but Zhang Wuji shook his hand and said, "Can't I give you some trinkets?"

Xiao Zhao's cheeks blushed; in a low voice she said, "Thank you very much, then. I am only afraid my Miss will be angry with me."

"What you did today was not a small matter," Zhang Wuji said, "How can the Left Emissary Yang, father and daughter, still suspect you?"

Xiao Zhao's heart was filled with joy; she said, "You have been gone for a long time, I was really worried; plus those Tartars came to attack. I don't know how, but suddenly I was swept by a great courage. If I think about it now, I was really scared. Master, can you talk to the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag brothers: asking them not to be offended by Xiao Zhao's boldness and unseemly behavior?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "They can't thank you enough, how can they blame you?"

Less than a day later they arrived within the Henan borders. By that time the world was in chaos; everywhere heroic and patriots raised their arms to fight the invaders. Mongolian officers and soldiers conducted an even stricter questioning and searching of insurgents. It was inconvenient for the

Ming Cult people to travel together as a large group, therefore, they traveled in smaller groups to the Mount Song [Song Shan] and regrouped at the foot of the mountain before they finally traveled together up the Shaoshi Peak.

The Gigantic Wood Flag Chief, Wen Cangsong, was sent ahead to deliver Zhang Wuji and the others' name cards to the Shaolin Temple. Zhang Wuji knew that this time they went up to the Shaolin Temple to ask for justice and although they did not want any fight, the end result would be difficult to tell. Supposing that the Shaolin monks did not want to talk but resort to violence instead, the Ming Cult could not balk at the challenge. Thereupon he passed on an order: while the leaders were entering the temple, the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag were to disperse around the temple and wait outside; as soon as they heard him whistle three times, they were to render their assistance. The flag leaders accepted the order and went their separate ways.

Not too long afterwards an old monk acting as the welcoming host went down the mountain accompanied by Wen Cangsong; he said, "The Temple Abbot and all elders are closing themselves in meditation; they cannot receive any guest."

The Ming Cult leaders' faces changed as they heard this. Zhou Dian indignantly said, "This is the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, personally came to the Shaolin Temple to pay a visit; the Senior Monks do not want to see him, don't you think this is a bit rude?"

That 'welcoming host' monk [Translator's note: I can't think of a single English word for this. Literally it means 'receiving guest'.] lowered his head with knitted eyebrows; his face full of anxiety, he said, "Can't see!"

Zhou Dian angrily stretched out his hand to grab his collar. Shuo Bude raised his arm to block, he said, "Zhou Xiong, don't be rude."

Peng Yingyu said, "Since the Abbot is in seclusion, then it will be the same if we can see Reverend Kong Zhi or Kong Xing."

That 'welcoming host' monk clasped his palms and said with an icy-cold voice, "Can't see!"

Peng Yingyu said again, "How about the Head of the Damo Hall or the Head of the Luohan Hall?"

That 'welcoming host' monk maintained his cold and indifferent look. "Can't see!" he said.

With a thundering voice Yin Tianzheng roared, "Bottom line: are you or are you not going to see us?" Both of his palms shot out with an earth-shattering force, 'bang!' he hit and broke a nearby pine tree into two; the top part, still with branches and leaves on it, collapsed to the ground, taking three crow nests with it.

The 'welcoming host' monk began to show fear on his face, he said, "You have come from afar, it is only proper for us to see you, but our elders are meditating in seclusion. Please come back later!" He bowed and clasped his palms, then turned around to leave.

Wei Yixiao's shadow flashed, blocking in front of the monk, he said, "I wonder how should we address Reverend?"

The 'welcoming host' monk said, "I can't say lowly monk's Buddhist name."

Wei Yixiao stretched out his hand and lightly slapped the monk's shoulder twice; he laughed and said, "Very good, very good! You repeatedly said 'Bu Jian' [Can't see] two words, turned out you are 'Bu Jian Da Shi' [Reverend 'Bu Jian' or Reverend Can't See], you are Kong Jian Shen Seng's [Divine Monk Kong Jian - the same 'Jian' character as 'Bu Jian'] martial brother. I wonder if the Yan Luo Wang [King of the Underworld] called you, 'Bu Jian Shen Seng', will you answer him?"

As the 'welcoming host' monk took the slap, a cold air flew from his shoulder to his chest; his body shook, his teeth chattered and his mouth made 'ge, ge' noises. Enduring all these he leaned sideways and slipped past Wei Yixiao; trembling and staggering all the way he ran back up the mountain.

"This fellow's internal strength is not Shaolin's," Wei Yixiao said.

Immediately Zhang Wuji recalled Yuan Zhen's internal strength, and admitted that Shaolin's internal strength was extraordinary. He said, "Bat King has slapped him twice with the 'han bing mian zhang' [cold-ice soft palm]; how can his grandmasters and his masters ignore it? Let us go up the mountain, I want to see if the senior monks truly do not want to see us."

Everybody knew a fierce fight would be unavoidable, Shaolin Sect was known as the Wulin world's 'tai shan bei dou' [Mount Tai and Big Dipper - meaning 'the ultimate']; over the last thousand of years it had enjoyed the reputation as the Undefeated Sect in the Jianghu. In the battle that would happen today finally they will see between the Ming Cult and the Shaolin Sect, which one was strong and which

one was weak. Everybody's spirit was boosted a hundred folds; picking up their speed they climbed up the mountain. They realized Shaolin Temple's martial art experts were as abundant as the cloud; so the intensity of the incoming big battle would not be a small matter.

Less than the time needed to drink tea later they had arrived at the pavilion in front of the temple. Zhang Wuji recalled how as a kid he followed his grandmaster going up this mountain and saw the Shaolin Sect's Three Divine Monks right here in this pavilion. Although it was only a few years, but back then he was a lone thin and sickly kid; while today he was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, with all the honor and respect belonged to the position. He felt like the two visits were a world apart.

He saw that two of the pillars of the stone pavilion were broken; the stone table in the middle of the pavilion was turned upside down on the ground.

Shuo Bude laughed and said, "Shaolin Monks are brave and fierce; these two pillars are broken recently. It looks like they had a big fight only a few days ago and have not had any chance to fix it."

Zhou Dian said, "After winning the battle today, we can come back and tear this pavilion apart."

They waited at the pavilion, expecting a lot of martial art experts to come out of the temple; after exchanging pleasantries they were going to ask straightaway why Yin Liting fell under such a cruel hand. If the monks did not give them a satisfying answer, then they will resort to violence. Who would have thought that after waiting for half a day they did not see any movement from the temple. A moment later they saw that some people came out from the back of

the temple and were going toward the mountain, from the distant it looked like there were forty, fifty people.

“Humph,” Peng Yingyu said, “They are deploying people to set an ambush.”

“Let’s go into the temple!” Zhang Wuji said.

Immediately, with Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao on his left, Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang on his right, Tie Guan Daoren [Priest Tie Guan], Peng Yingyu, Zhou Dian and Shuo Bude, Four Wanderers behind him, Zhang Wuji entered the temple gate. Upon entering the ‘da xiong bao dian’ [great hero precious hall] they saw the sacrificial table in front of the image of Buddha was laying on its side, the incense burner fell and the ashes were scattered on the ground; but they couldn’t see anyone there.

Shuo Bude laughed coldly and said, “As the Shaolin Sect people saw us coming, they were panic-stricken and confused that they knocked the incense burner over. Funny, very funny!”

In a clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “Ming Cult’s Zhang Wuji, joined by Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, and the other Cult Leaders have come to pay a visit. We wish to see the Abbot.” His voice was not loud, but it was supported by abundant power that it echoed on the copper bell and the big drum hanging inside the hall, creating a buzzing noise throughout the hall.

Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others looked at each other, thinking, “Jiaozhu’s internal energy is so profound, it truly is amazing. Even if Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang] were still alive, his internal energy would still be inferior to this. It looks like in the incoming battle today our victory is

imminent.”

Zhang Wuji’s voice could be heard in the front and rear courtyards, and all over the Shaolin Temple; yet after waiting for half an afternoon nobody came out.

“Hey!” Zhou Dian shouted, “Shaolin Temple Monks! Brothers! Are you playing hide and seek? Are you pretending to be a new bride?” His voice was louder than Zhang Wuji’s, but the copper bell and the big drum were not buzzing.

They waited for a little bit longer; still nobody came out. Peng Yingyu said, “Suddenly I got a bad feeling about this temple; something is really wrong.”

Zhou Dian laughed and said, “You are a monk entering a temple; this is your appropriate place, what do you mean something is wrong?”

“Ah,” Tie Guan Daoren suddenly said, “Here is a piece of meditation stick cut by a blade.”

“Ah!” Shuo Bude exclaimed, “There is a blotch of blood here!”

Zhou Dian laughed, “They must have remembered the battle of the Brightness Peak,” he said, “Our Jiaozhu’s reputation has spread far and wide, Shaolin Temple hangs high the truce flag! You see, they were so panic-stricken that they ran away dropping everything, including their weapons.”

Tie Guan Daoren shook his head, “That’s not right!” he said.

“Why not?” Zhou Dian asked.

Tie Guan Daoren said, "What about this blood stain?"

Zhou Dian replied, "Most likely they cut themselves in fright ..." Speaking to this point he stopped, since he realized his idea was too far fetched. Right that moment a gust of wind blew, rising everybody's sleeve. "It's nice and cool!" Zhou Dian exclaimed. Suddenly they heard a loud crashing noise from the west, a big pine tree about a dozen 'zhang's away from them fell down.

The crowd was startled; immediately they jumped toward the collapsed tree. The tree grew on the southeast corner of the courtyard; there was nobody in the courtyard, so nobody knew how such a big tree fell down just by a puff of wind and in the process crashed half of the surrounding wall. They examined the broken part only to see the core of the tree to be already ruptured, clearly it was shaken by someone with profound skill; so the tree had already withered and dried up, and not fell down because of the wind just now.

They looked around their surrounding and one after another exclaimed, "Ah, it's strange!" "There was heavy fighting in here!" "So fierce, so many people were injured!" The courtyard was full of traces of intense fighting: there were blade marks and imprints of fists and palms on the green flagstones below, on the trunk and branches of the surrounding trees, and on the enclosing walls. They could also see bloodstains everywhere; obviously the battle was truly bloody. There were also deep footprints on the ground, a sign that the combatants were martial art experts who stake their whole internal energies.

Zhang Wuji said, "Quickly grab that 'welcoming host' monk, we need to ask him clearly."

Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude and the others quickly dispersed to look, but the 'receiving guest' monk had disappeared without any trace. The Five Elements Flags also looked everywhere. A little over an hour later all the Flag leaders came back one after another with their report: nobody was found in the temple, but they saw traces of violent battle everywhere. Many of the halls and rooms had bloodstains in them, along with broken blades and other weapons, but not a single body was to be seen.

"Left Emissary Yang, what do you think?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"This battle happened two, three days ago," Yang Xiao replied, "Could it be that the entire Shaolin Sect is annihilated and not a single one survived?"

"Wasn't there a few dozens people went out the temple from the back just now?" Shuo Bude asked.

Yang Xiao replied, "Quite possibly they were the Shaolin Sect's enemy. They were left behind to take care of things in here; but as they saw our large group arrived they slipped away."

Peng Yingyu said, "Judging from the turn of events, I think you are right. That 'welcoming host' monk must be an impostor; it's a pity we could not capture him. But among the enemies of the Shaolin Sect, which one is this powerful? Could it be the Beggar Clan?"

Zhou Dian said, "The Beggar Clan is indeed big, and has a lot of martial art experts, but they don't have the ability to wipe out the entire Shaolin Temple that not a single survivor is left. Only our Ming Cult has this kind of ability; but we clearly did not do it, do we?"

“Zhou Dian, can you not spout nonsense?” Tie Guan Daoren said, “Our Cult obviously did not do it, do you think we don’t know?”

“Reporting to Jiaozhu,” Yan Yuan, the Flag Leader of the Thick Earth came to report, “It looks like the eighteen arhats in the Luohan Hall have been shifted, but there was no footprint around.”

The leaders knew that Yan Yuan and his Thick Earth Flag were experts in building and construction, so his suspicion must not be unfounded. “Let us take a look,” they said.

Upon entering the Luohan Hall, they saw quite a bit of blood splattered on the walls and broken blades and meditation sticks strewn on the floor.

“Yan Xiong,” Zhou Dian said, “What’s unusual about these eighteen arhats?”

“Each Luohan arhat was moved from their original position,” Yan Yuan replied, “At first I thought there was another door somewhere, but after carefully examining the wall, I did not see any secret passageway anywhere.”

Yang Xiao was deep in thought for half an afternoon before he finally said, “Let us push these arhats and take a look.”

Yan Yuan leaped toward the platform and pushed the long-eyebrowed arhat to the side, exposing the wall behind it, but there was nothing unusual there. Yang Xiao also leaped to the platform to take a closer look at that long-eyebrowed arhat. “Uh,” he suddenly exclaimed, “There is a character on the back of this arhat.” He turned the arhat around. To their astonishment, the crowd saw a ‘mie’ [extinguish] character

as big as a human's head.

The Luohan arhats were inlaid with gold, but by now a large 'mie' character was engraved on the glittering golden back with a sharp object. The engraving was about a 'cun' [an inch] deep that the clay inside was exposed. The engraving was new, obviously it was done not too long ago.

"What's the meaning of this 'mie' character?" Zhou Dian wondered, "Ah, right! It must be the Emei Sect attacked the Shaolin Temple; Mijue Shitai left this to demonstrate her power."

The group of heroes thought his idea was too unthinkable; they all shook their heads. While speaking they turned all the arhats around. Other than the Subduing Dragon Arhat on the extreme right and the Crouching Tiger Arhat on the extreme left, a large character was engraved on the back of every arhat. From right to left there were sixteen characters which read: 'First execute Shaolin then extinguish Wudang, only our Ming Cult is fit to rule the Wulin world!'

Yin Tianzheng, Tie Guan Daoren, Shuo Bude and the others called out together, "This is a treacherous plan to shift the blame!" They realized these sixteen characters were a threat to incite terror; they recalled how the Shaolin Temple's monks suffered an unexpected calamity, and the blame was put upon the Ming Cult's head. Everybody was anxious and grieved at the same time.

"Let us quickly scrape off these characters to avoid injustice toward us," Zhou Dian called out.

Yang Xiao said, "The enemy intention is obviously malicious; scraping off these sixteen characters may not be necessarily useful."

This time Zhou Dian felt what he said made a good sense, so he did not argue. "What should we do, then?" he asked.

Shuo Bude said, "This is actually evidence. If we can find the person who hatched this treacherous plan, we can take him here and confront him with these sixteen characters."

Yang Xiao nodded his agreement.

Peng Yingyu said, "Xiao Seng [little/lowly monk] still have a question, I need the Left Emissary Yang's enlightenment. The person who carved these sixteen characters obviously wanted to shift the blame to our Cult; placing the responsibility of Shaolin Sect's destruction on our head, so that the Wulin world's heroes would rally together to attack us. Then why did he turn these arhats to the wall? Why didn't they leave these large sixteen characters facing outward? If it wasn't because of Flag Leader Yan's attentiveness, nobody would know there are characters on the back of these Luohan arhats."

Yang Xiao was deep in thought. "Come to think about it," he said, "There must be someone else who turned these arhats back. Most likely there is someone helping our Cult in secret. We owe him a big debt of gratitude."

"Who is this person?" the crowd asked almost simultaneously, "How did Left Emissary Yang know?"

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This is a complicated mystery, I cannot possibly know everything ..."

"Ah!" he has not finished his words when suddenly Zhang Wuji loudly exclaimed, "'First execute Shaolin, then extinguish Wudang,' I am afraid ... I am afraid Wudang is

facing a terrible disaster.”

“We must leave immediately to render our help,” Wei Yixiao said, “We might also find out which dog has done it all.”

“We can’t wait much longer,” Yin Tianzheng also said, “We must leave now. These bandits have already left one or two days ago.”

End of Chapter 23.

Chapter 24 - Tai Chi - The Origin of Soft Subduing Hard

(Translated by dgfds01)



Zhang Sanfeng picked the wooden sword, his right hand held the sword, his left hand in sword form, both hands made a loop and he slowly raised them. This opening form was followed by 'Encase the Moon with Three Rings', 'Biggest Star in the Big Dipper', 'Swallow Skims the Water', 'Left Block', 'Right Block' ... each form smoothly following the other.

Zhang Wuji wondered whether some misfortune had befallen his martial uncles on the way back from the Western Regions. Throughout the whole journey there had been no news of them. If any misfortune had delayed them on their way, the only people left on Wudang Mountain were his grandteacher and the third generation disciples. His third martial uncle Yu Daiyan was paralysed. If a formidable enemy attacked, how could they resist them? Thinking so, he felt anxious. He said clearly: "Elders and brothers, my late father was a Wudang disciple. I am greatly indebted to my grandteacher. Now that Wudang is facing great trouble, the earlier we get there the better. Bat King Wei will accompany me to first to lend aid. The rest of you should arrive in batches. I request that Left Messenger Yang and Grandpa arrange this. " After saying this, he cupped his hands and left. Wei Yixiao used his lightness kungfu and followed him. Before the crowd could say anything in agreement, the two of them were already outside Shaolin temple. Their lightness kungfu was really amazing, without equal in the world. The two of them did not dare risk even a short moment's delay. Without stopping they quickly covered ten li. Though Wei Yixiao did not fall behind, after some time he gradually found it difficult to keep up. Zhang Wuji thought: "Wudang Mountain is a long distance away, we can't keep this up without rest. Moreover there is a formidable enemy in front. We should save our energy for battle." He said to Wei Yixiao: "Let's buy a couple of horses from the next town to conserve our energy." Wei Yixiao had already considered this but he had brought the matter up. He said: "Sect Leader, buying horses will waste too much time."

Not long later, they met five or six horses approaching. Wei Yixiao jumped up, lifted up two riders and put them gently on the ground. He called out: "Sect Leader, mount up!" Zhang Wuji stopped in his tracks. In his heart he felt that

stealing horses like that was not the right thing to do. Wei Yixiao called out: "When dealing with important matters, don't be held back by trifling affairs. Why worry so much?" He lifted another two riders off their horses. It so happened that those people also knew some martial arts. Cursing, they drew their weapons to attack. While holding on to four horses, Wei Yixiao kicked their weapons out of their hands. One of them shouted: "Who are you robbers? What are your names!" Zhang Wuji felt it would be even worse if they got tangled up any further. So he leapt onto a horse's back and went with Wei Yixiao. Not daring to give chase, the horse owners could only curse. Zhang Wuji said: "Even though we have pressing matters to attend to, others may also have urgent matters. I don't feel comfortable doing this." Wei Yixiao laughed and said: "Sect Leader, this is small matter not worth mentioning. The way the Ming Cult handled affairs in the past... - now that is truly unscrupulous and illegal." So saying, he laughed loudly.

Zhang Wuji thought: "The Ming Cult is considered an evil sect. There is some truth that. However it can be hard to determine what is righteous and what is evil." He was the sect leader and yet he had difficulty making decisions. He was even undecided about a minor issue like the horses. Though his kungfu skills were of a high level, there are many matters in this world that cannot be settled with kungfu alone. He hoped to bring Xie Xun back soon, and pass this heavy burden on to him. Yet he was unwilling to simply take the easy way out. At this moment, he suddenly saw two people with silver rods in their hands blocking the road. Wei Yixiao shouted: "Get out of the way!" He waved the horse whip. One man blocked the whip with his staff, another man yelled and waved his left hand. Wei Yixiao's horse was startled and stood up on its hind legs. Four men dressed in black then came out from a grove. They looked like they were able fighters. Wei Yixiao yelled: "Sect leader go on, let

me deal with them.” Zhang Wuji saw that these people are trying to prevent reinforcements from reaching Wudang. Wudang Sect was in a very precarious and dangerous situation. He knew that Wei Yixiao's lightness kungfu and martial arts is amazing, he could handle these people. Even if he couldn't win he would be able to protect himself. Zhang Wuji squeezed both his legs to urge the horse forward. Two men in black used steel staffs to block the way. Zhang Wuji bent down, seized the staffs and threw them forward. The two men screamed as their legs were broken by the steel staffs and they fell to the ground. He saw that the four men fighting Wei Yixiao were not weak. He was worried that after he left more enemies will appear, so he helped Wei Yixiao deal with two of them.

Though Mt. Song and Mt. Wudang are in two different provinces - Henan and Hubei, one is in west Henan and the other in north Hubei. So the distance between them was not that great. After crossing the Ma Mountain, to the south was open country and the horse was able to travel quickly. At noon, he passed a small village. Zhang Wuji felt hungry so he stopped to buy some food. Suddenly he heard a horse scream behind him. He turned around and saw a knife stuck in a horse's stomach. A man quickly tried to hide.

Zhang Wuji jumped up and grabbed that person. Only to see it is another man dressed in black with the front of his clothes splashed with horse blood. Zhang Wuji yelled: “Whose orders are you following? Which sect do you belong to? Has your party reached Wudang Mountain?” That person did not answer despite being questioned a few times. Zhang Wuji did not dare delay any longer, thinking that that once he reached Wudang Mountain he would understand what was going on. He sealed the man's 'Da Tui' pressure point. The sealed pressure point would cause the man to suffer great pain for three days and three nights.

He then got onto his horse and continued his journey. Soon he reached the Three Palaces and crossed the Han River. While on a boat, he stared into the water thinking of the time Zhang Sanfeng and himself met Chang Yuchun and saved Zhou Zhiruo. Her beautiful image surfaced in his mind. After crossing the Han River, he headed south. By now night had already fallen. He continued for another two hours. It was a dark night. The horse was extremely exhausted and could not take it anymore. It collapsed to the ground. Zhang Wuji patted the horse's back saying: "Horsey, you're free to go now!" He utilised his lightness kungfu and was quickly on his way.

After traveling for eight hours, he heard the sound of hoofbeats - there was a group of people ahead. He quicken his pace and overtook them swiftly. Because of his speed and the darkness, no one noticed him. From their direction, they are heading for Wudang Mountain. The twenty or so people did not say a word, so he was unable to determine their intentions. But he could dimly see that each one carried weapons. There is no doubt that they are going to cause trouble for Wudang Sect. He thought: "I've managed to overtake them so Wudang Sect has not yet been attacked." After continuing for less than an hour, he met another group of people heading for Wudang Mountain. In total he ran into five groups. The biggest group consisted of about thirty people and the smallest about ten. After seeing the fifth group, he was even more anxious, thinking: "How many other groups have already gone up the mountain? Have they already clashed with people from my sect?" Though he was not a Wudang disciple, because of his father's background he considered Wudang his own sect. So thinking, he increased his speed. Not long later reached the mountain and started climbing. Fortunately he did not run into anymore enemies. Halfway up the mountain, he saw

someone hurrying upward. It was a monk and his lightness kungfu was amazing. Zhang Wuji followed him from a distance observing his actions.

He saw the monk go up the mountain. At the peak, someone shouted: "Which friend comes to Wudang at this time of the night?" As the sound died away, four people appeared, two Taoist priests and two laymen (non-priests). These were Wudang Sect's third and fourth generation disciples. The monk said: "Kong Xiang of Shaolin has an urgent matter to see Wudang's Master Zhang about." Zhang Wuji thought with surprise: "So he is a member of Shaolin's 'Kong' generation, the same generation as Abbot Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing. He actually took the trouble to come personally to Wudang Mountain to bring news."

One of the Wudang Taoist priests said: "Reverend, you have come from afar. Please come in and have some tea." And so saying he led the way. Kong Xiang gave his saber to a priest, not daring to bring his weapon in. Zhang Wuji saw the priest lead Kong Xiang into the Purple Paradise Hall. He squatted down outside the window. Only to hear Kong Xiang say loudly: "Please report to Master Zhang immediately. The situation is urgent; there is no time to lose!" The priest replied: "Reverend, you have come at the wrong time. My grandteacher has been meditating in seclusion for over a year. We haven't seen him in some time." Kong Xiang said: "In that case, can you please inform Eldest Hero Song." The priest replied: "My Eldest Martial Uncle, my Master and the other martial uncles have not returned from attacking the Ming Sect." When Zhang Wuji heard this he was shaken. So Song Yuanqiao and the rest had really run into trouble on the way back.

Kong Xiang sighed and said: "If that is so then Wu Dang and Shaolin are in the same boat. It would be difficult to escape

today's disaster." Not understanding what he meant, the priest said: "Senior Martial Brother Guxu Zi is in charge of our sect's general affairs. I will ask him to come and pay his respects to reverend." Kong Xiang asked: "Whose disciple is this Guxu Zi?" The priest answered: "He is Third Uncle Yu's disciple." Kong Xiang said: "Even though Third Hero Yu's arms and legs have been injured, his mind is still clear. Let me speak to him." The Taoist said: "Alright." He turned around and went inside.

Kong Xiang paced back and forth impatiently. From time to time, he tilted his head and listened intently, worrying that the enemy had arrived. Not long later, the priest hurriedly came out. He bowed and said: "Third Uncle Yu invites you in. He requests that the Reverend excuses him for being unable to come out and greet you." The priest's behaviour was now even more respectful than before. This was probably because on hearing that a Shaolin monk of the "Kong" generation, Yu Daiyan ordered him to be very polite. Kong Xiang nodded his head and went along with him to Yu Daiyan's room.

Zhang Wuji pondered: "Third Martial Uncle's four limbs are paralysed but his eyes and ears are still very sharp. If I listen outside his window, he might detect me." He walked towards Yu Daiyan's room but stopped outside. A short while later, the Taoist priest hurriedly came out of Yu Daiyan's room. He said in a low voice: "Qing Feng, Ming Yue! Come here." Two novice priests came up to him and called: "Martial Uncle!" The priest said: "Third Martial Uncle wants to come out. Get the carry chair ready." The two novices complied. Zhang Wuji had lived on Wudang Mountain for a few years. That priest was Yu Lianzhou's new disciple so he had never met him. However, he recognized Qing Feng and Ming Yue. He knew that when Yu Daiyan was carried on his chair by novices whenever he left the room. He watched the two go

to the wing where the carry chair was kept and silently followed them. He waited till the two entered the room before suddenly calling: "Qing Feng, Ming Yue, do you recognize me?" The two of them jumped in fright. Looking at Zhang Wuji, they thought he seemed vaguely familiar but they failed to recognize him. Zhang Wuji laughed, and said: "Have you forgotten me? I'm Little Martial Uncle Wuji." The two of them then remembered the past, and were very happy. They said: "Ah, Little Martial Uncle, you've come back! Have you recovered from your illness?" The three of them were around the same age and used to play together. Zhang Wuji said: "Qing Feng, let me pretend to be you and go carry Third Martial Uncle. Let's see whether he notices it's me." Qing Feng hesitated, saying: "That...that is not a very good idea!" Zhang Wuji said: "When Third Martial Uncle sees that I have recovered from my illness and returned, he'll be very happy. Why would he scold you?" Both of them knew that Zhang Sanfeng and the Wudang Six Heroes all love Zhang Wuji very much. His recovery and return to Wudang was a very happy thing. He only wanted to play a little joke to cheer Yu Daiyan up; there was no harm in it. Ming Yue laughed: "Let's do what Little Martial Uncle says!" While giggling, Qing Feng took off his Taoist robe and shoes, and exchanged them with Zhang Wuji. Ming Yue tied his hair in Taoist fashion. He now looked like a little novice priest.

Ming Yue said: "You want to impersonate Qing Feng but you don't look like him. We'll say that you are a newcomer and that Qing Feng broke his leg so you replaced him." Zhang Wuji laughed: "Good idea....." The priest outside the room scolded: "What are you two giggling about? Taking so long to get here." Zhang Wuji and Ming Yue stuck out their tongues and carried the chair into Yu Daiyan's room. The two of them lifted Yu Daiyan into the carry chair. Yu Daiyan had a solemn expression on his face and he paid no attention to who the novices who carried him were. He said: "Go to the small

compound at the back of the mountain to see grandteacher!" Ming Yue answered: "Yes!" He lifted the front end of the carry chair while Zhang Wuji lifted the back end. Yu Daiyan could only see Ming Yue's back; Zhang Wuji was hidden from his view. Kong Xiang went along with them but the priest did not dare follow without Yu Daiyan's orders. The small compound where Zhang Sanfeng meditated was deep in the bamboo forest at the back of the mountain. The forest is dense and dark - other than the sound of birds chirping, not the slightest sound could be heard. Ming Yue and Zhang Wuji carried Yu Daiyan to the front of a small compound and stopped. Yu Daiyan was about to call out when suddenly they heard Zhang Sanfeng say: "A eminent reverend from Shaolin comes to my humble residence. Please forgive this old Taoist for not coming out to welcome you." With a 'ya' sound, the bamboo door was shoved open and Zhang Sanfeng came out. Kong Xiang wore an astonished expression on his face, he was shocked that Zhang Sanfeng already knew he was a Shaolin monk. But then he assumed that the priest had already come to report. Yu Daiyan knew his Master's martial arts were growing more and more profound. By the sound of Kong Xiang's footsteps alone, he could tell which sect he belong to. Zhang Wuji could hide his presence from Zhang Sanfeng because his inner power was much grater that Kong Xiang's. He saw that though his grandteacher's face was glowing with health, his bread and eyebrows are completely white. He had aged quite a lot since their separation. He was both happy and grieved. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he hurriedly turned his head away.

Kong Xiang put his palms together and said: "Kong Xiang of Shaolin pays his respects to Master Zhang of Wudang." Zhang Sanfeng returned his salutations saying: "There's no need to be so polite. Please come in." The five of them entered the small compound. On the table was a teapot and

a teacup. There was a rush cushion on the floor and a wooden sword hanging on the wall. Other than that, the room was bare. Kong Xiang said: "Master Zhang, Shaolin Sect has suffered the greatest catastrophe in its history. The Demon Cult launched an unexpected sneak attack on us. From the abbot Kong Wen downwards, all have either died in battle or have been captured. I barely managed to escape. The Demon Cult is now heading for Wudang. Today the fate of the martial world rests in Master Zhang's hands." After saying this he cried. Zhang Wuji was shaken, he knew Shaolin had met with a tragedy, but he never imagined the whole sect was destroyed.

Though Zhang Sanfeng had been seeking enlightenment for a hundred years, this sudden sad news shocked him and he was momentarily speechless. Collecting himself, he said: "The Demon Sect is really savage. How did the Shaolin experts fall to the Demon Cult?" Kong Xiang replied: "Martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Xing and their disciples, together five main sects besieged Brightness Peak. The monks who stayed behind waited calmly everyday for good news. On that day, there was a report that they had returned from a great victory. Abbot Kong Wen was delighted with the news. Accompanied by the temple disciples, he went out to welcome them. We saw martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Xing leading the disciples who had gone along, returning to the temple. They had even captured several hundred prisoners. When they entered the main courtyard, the Abbot asked about details of the victory. Brother Kong Zhi gave yes, no answers. Brother Kong Xing stared at the ground and said: 'Brother look out, we have fallen into the enemies' hands. The prisoners are our captors...' At the moment of the Abbot's shock, the prisoners took out weapons and suddenly attacked. My sect's people were caught off guard. Also, the most skilled fighters went on the Western expedition, those who remained behind were weak fighters. The escape routes

from the courtyard blocked by the enemy. After a fierce fight, we were finally defeated. Brother Kong Xing died for our cause at the scene..." After saying up to here, he broke off sobbing. Zhang Sanfeng said sadly: "The Demon Sect is really ruthless. How can anyone be prepared for such an evil trick?" Only to see Kong Xiang open the yellow cloth bundle he had carried on his back. Inside was an oil-cloth. He opened the oil-cloth to reveal human head. The eyes were wide open and the face angry. It was one of the three Divine Reverends of Shaolin, Kong Xing. Zhang Sanfeng and Zhang Wuji both knew Kong Xing's appearance. As soon as they saw it, they could not help exclaiming in shock. Kong Xiang sobbed:"I risked my life to retrieve martial brother Kong Xing's body. Master Zhang, how do you think we should take revenge? " So saying he placed Kong Xing's head on the table, and prostrated himself on the ground. Zhang Sanfeng bowed back.

Zhang Wuji thought back to the fight on Brightness Peak. Divine Reverend Kong Xing was generous and heroic, a worthy great master of Shaolin. Now that he had suffered death in the hands of an evil person, his head and body separated, Zhang Wuji was sad.

Zhang Sanfeng saw that Kong Xiang knelt on the ground crying for a long time. He helped him up saying:"Brother Kong Xiang,Shaolin and Wudang are one family. This blood debt must not..." Just as he said that,there was a loud 'wham' sound as Kong Xiang's two hands hit him on the stomach.

This happened extremely suddenly. Though Zhang Sanfeng's martial arts were profound and amazing,he never expected that a top Shaolin expert who had come from far to bring news would attack him. At this moment, he even thought that Kong Xiang had lost his mind momentarily due

to grief, and imagined he was an enemy. The next moment he realized that this could not be. The palm used to hit him was Shaolin's "Diamond Prajna Palm". Kong Xiang had attacked with full force, using all his internal energy. His face was pale but there was a hint of a fierce smile.

Zhang Wuji, Yu Daiyan and Ming Yue were so shock they were rooted on the spot. Yu Daiyan was paralysed, so he could not help his Master. Zhang Wuji was young and inexperienced, he did not realize that Kong Xiang had struck a lethal blow. The two of them could only let out an exclamation. Only to see Zhang Sanfeng stretch out his left palm and tapped Kong Xiang lightly on the head. Though this tap was soft and gentle, it was as hard as iron. Kong Xiang's skull was smashed and he dropped dead to the ground without uttering a sound. Yu Daiyan said urgently: "Master, you..." As he said this, he stopped. He saw Zhang Sanfeng sit down with his eyes closed. White mist was coming out of his head. Suddenly he opened his mouth and coughed out fresh blood.

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He knew his grandteacher's injuries were not light. If the blood had been black or purple, with his unparalleled internal energy, he would be able to recover within 3 days. But the blood he coughed up was fresh and it spurted out. This meant he had suffered severe internal injuries. At this time, he wondered: "Should I reveal myself to help grandteacher?"

Just at this time, the sound of footsteps approaching could be heard, someone had arrived outside. From the hurried sound of the footsteps, the person was very anxious. But he did not dare rush in or make a sound. Yu Daiyan said: "Is that Ling Xu? What is the matter?" The welcoming priest Ling Xu said: "Third Martial Uncle, there is a big group of Demon Cult outside. They say they want to meet Grandmaster. They

swore with vulgar words, saying they want to annihilate Wudang Sect.....” Yu Daiyan shouted:“Shut up!” He was afraid Zhang Sanfeng would be distracted, causing his injuries become worse. Zhang Sanfeng slowly opened his eyes and said:“Shaolin's Diamond Prajna Palm is really powerful. Unless I have 3 months to take care of my injuries it'll be difficult to make a complete recovery.” Zhang Wuji thought:“It looks like Grandteacher's injuries are more serious than I thought.”

Only to hear Zhang Sanfeng say:“The Ming Cult is launching a large attack on us. Ai, I wonder if Yuanqiao, Lianzhou and the others are safe?Daiyan, what do you think we should do?” Yu Daiyan did not reply. He knows that except for his Master and himself, all the third and forth generation disciples remaining on the mountain had mediocre martial arts. Going out to fight would be the equivalent of suicide. The only thing to do would be to sacrifice his life facing the enemy to give his master a chance to escape and recover, and take revenge in the future. So he said:“Ling Xu, go and tell those people that I'm coming out to meet them. Let them wait in the Hall of Triple Clarity.” Ling Xu obeyed and left. Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan's master-disciple relationship was very old and they understood each other very well. Hearing this, Zhang Sanfeng understood his intentions. He said:“Daiyan,life of death, victory or defeat, these are unimportant things. But Wudang's martial arts legacy must not disappear just like that. During my meditation in the past eighteen months I have comprehended the essence of martial arts and created Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword. I'll teach it to you now.”

Yu Daiyan was stunned. He had been paralysed for such a long time, how could he learn martial arts? Moreover the enemies were already at their doorstep – there was no time to learn martial arts. He could only say:“Master!” Beyond

that he was speechless. Zhang Sanfeng laughed a little and said: "Since the founding of Wudang, we have done many good deeds. If there is any justice in the world we will not be destroyed like this. This Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword that I have created are completely different from all other kinds of martial arts. Stillness defeats movement, and that which moves first overcomes that which moves later. Your master is already more than a hundred years old. Even if I don't run into a powerful enemy, how much longer can I live? I am happy that I have created these martial arts at the twilight of my life. Yuanqiao, Lianzhou, Songxi, Liting and Shenggu are not here now. Except for Qingshu, there are no extraordinary talents among the third and fourth generation disciples. Moreover he is not here too. Daiyan, you are the one who can bear this heavy burden. It matters not that Wudang Sect is humiliated today. So long as Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword survive, Wudang Sect's name will live on for thousands of years." After saying this, his spirit lifted up heroically, the presence of powerful enemies no longer bothered him. Yu Daiyan obeyed, he understood his master wanted him to bear the enemies' insults. The main priority is to ensure Wudang's martial arts survive.

Zhang Sanfeng slowly stood up. He lowered both of his hands, with the back of his hands facing outwards and his fingers relaxed. His feet were slightly apart. He then raised his arms to chest height. His left hand faced upward in the Yin Palm position and the right hand in the Yang Palm position. He said: "This is the Taiji Fist opening stance." Then he demonstrated each form one by one, calling out their names: - Grasping the Sparrow's Tail, Single Whip, Lifting up the Hand, White Crane Spreads its Wings, Brushing the Knee and the Twisted Step, Playing the Pipa, Step Forward Deflect Parry and Punch, Apparent Closure, Crossing Hands, Carrying the Tiger Returning to the Mountain.....

*These are the actual names of Taijiquan forms.

Zhang Wuji watched attentively, not taking his eyes away. At first he thought his grandteacher was deliberately demonstrating the moves slowly so Yu Daiyan could see them clearly. But when he saw the seventh stance "Playing the Pipa (a Chinese musical instrument)"- the left hand embodying Yang and the right hand Yin, eyes fixed on the back of his left hand, both hands pushing slowly. This push was as heavy as a mountain but as light as a feather. Zhang Wuji finally understood: "This is about the slow beating the swift, about stillness overcoming movement. I never imagined such amazing martial arts to exist in this world." He could understand this because his martial arts foundation was very firm. The more he watched the more amazed he felt. Both of Zhang Sanfeng's hands moved in circular form. Each stroke encompassed Taiji's Yin and Yang. It was so incredible, like nothing ever seen in the world before. After a while, Zhang Sanfeng stopped. Even though he had just suffered severe internal injuries, he seemed stronger and more energetic going through the fist techniques. With his two hands holding the Taiji circle, he said "The essence of this fist technique is 16 words - 'Xu Ling Ding Jin, Han Xiong Ba Bei, Song Yao Chui Tun, Chen Jian Zhui Zhou' (*). Use intention not strength. The form and spirit become one. This is core of the fist technique." Then he went on explaining the details.

*Xu Ling Ding Jin-Empty the neck, let energy reach the crown

Han Xiong Ba Bei-Sink the chest, lift the back

Chen Jian Zhui Zhou-Sink the shoulders, drop the elbows

(From "The Way of Qigong" by Kenneth S. Cohen, thanks to dustbiter)

and Song Yao Chui Tun - Loose waist, bend at the buttocks.*

Yu Daiyan did not say a word and listened. He knew that

time was pressing, he did not have the leisure to ask questions. Although there were parts he did not understand completely, he memorized everything. In the event that any calamity should befall his master, he would still be able to pass the theory on. In the future there will be some intelligent and talented disciple who would be able to understand it. By contrast, Zhang Wuji could understand most of it. He could figure out Zhang Sanfeng's every word and each stance and was extremely happy. Zhang Sanfeng saw that Yu Daiyan looked confused. He asked: "How much do you understand?" Yu Daiyan said: "Your disciple is stupid. I can only understand 30-40 percent. But I have memorized each stance and all the theory." Zhang Sanfeng said: "It is difficult for you. If Lianzhou were here he would be able to understand about 50 percent. Ai, your fifth brother's comprehension was the greatest. It's a pity he died young. If I had 3 years to teach him, I would be able to pass my legacy on." Listening to him talk about his father, there was a sour feeling in Zhang Wuji's heart. Zhang Sanfeng said: "The key to this fist technique is its loose yet not loose, spread out yet not spread out, broken yet uninterrupted....." As he was talking, there was a yell: "That old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng is hiding. Let us kill all his disciples and grand-disciples." Another coarse and heroic voice said: "Great! First let us burn this place down. " Yet another person said: "Burning the old Taoist to death is letting him off easily. We should catch him, tie him up and parade him in front of every sect. Let everyone see how this Mount Tai and North Star is brought down."

Though the small compound was two li away from the main hall, everyone could hear those words clearly. The enemies must be showing off their internal energy, which was very powerful. Listening to these insults on his master, Yu Daiyan was furious and his eyes flared up. Zhang Sanfeng said: "Daiyan, why do you forget what I told you so easily? If

you can't bear some insults, how can you accomplish the important task? " Yu Daiyan said:"Yes, I accept your teachings." Zhang Sanfeng said:"Your whole body is paralysed so the enemy won't be wary against you. Whatever happens, you must not lose your temper and act rashly. This technique has been created with much sweat and blood. If it fails to be passed on, you will be the worst sinner of Wudang Sect." When Yu Daiyan heard this, he broke out in cold sweat. He knew the meaning behind his master's words - no matter what the enemies do to humiliate them, he must seek to preserve his life so the techniques can be passed on.

Zhang Sanfeng took out a pair of Lohan figurines and gave them to Yu Daiyan (I'm not sure how Yu Daiyan received them with his crippled hands) saying:"Kong Xiang said that Shaolin has been annihilated. We don't know if that is true. This person is a top expert from Shaolin and yet he has surrendered to the enemies. This means Shaolin must have suffered from some great danger. These Lohan figures were give to me by Heroine Guo Xiang a hundred years ago. In the future you should return them to Shaolin. Hopefully parts of Shaolin martial arts will be preserved through them." He then waved his sleeve and walked out the door.

Yu Daiyan said:"Carry me and follow Master" Ming Yue and Zhang Wuji lifted up the carry chair and followed behind Zhang Sanfeng. When the four of them arrived at the Hall of Triple Clarity, they saw there were about three to four hundred people there. Zhang Sanfeng walked to the centre and nodded a greeting but remained silent. Yu Daiyan said loudly:"This is my Master, the Venerable Master Zhang. Why did you come to Wudang Mountain?" Zhang Sanfeng's reputation had shaken the martial arts world, for a moment everyone looked at him. They only saw a man with tall stature with silver coloured hair and beard and wearing a

dirty grey Taoist robe, there was nothing special about him. Zhang Wuji saw that around half of the people present were wearing Ming Cult's clothes. Their ten leaders were wearing ordinary clothes, probably because they were too proud to impersonate other people. There were tall and short, monks and ordinary people, hundreds of people crowded into the hall. It was difficult to judge them based on their appearance. At this moment, suddenly someone called out: "Cult leader has arrived!" Immediately the hall fell into a respectful silence. The ten leaders and their followers rushed out to greet their leader. In just a short time, the hall was completely empty. Then footsteps signaled the return of those people. They halted outside the hall. Zhang Wuji looked through the door and was startled. He saw eight people carrying a yellow satin sedan chair and seven or eight bodyguards. They stopped at the entrance. The people carrying the sedan chair were the Eight Divine Archers from Green Willow Village.

Zhang Wuji was shaken. He rubbed both his hands on the dusty floor and then smeared the dust on his face. Ming Yue only thought that he was terrified seeing a powerful enemy arrive and so tried to hide his features. He too panicked and followed Zhang Wuji. In a flash, the two novice priests' faces were both grey, making it difficult to make out their features. The sedan chair's door opened and a young man got out. He was wearing a white robe embroidered with a blood red flame and carrying a fan. It was Zhao Min disguised as a man. Zhang Wuji thought: "So it is her who is behind all this, no wonder Shaolin was so utterly defeated." Only to see her enter the hall followed by around 10 people. A tall and powerfully-built man steps forward, bowed and said: "Reporting to Sect Leader, this is Wudang Sect's Zhang Sanfeng and that paralysed man should be his third disciple Yu Daiyan." Zhao Min nodded, took a few steps forward, folded her fan, cupped her hands and bowed to Zhang

Sanfeng, saying: "Ming Cult Leader, Junior Zhang Wuji, is fortunate to meet the North Star of the wulin today!" Zhang Wuji was furious. He scolded in his heart: "It's bad enough that you pretend to be the Ming Cult leader. How dare you use my name and come to trick my Grandteacher!" When Zhang Sanfeng heard the words "Zhang Wuji", he thought it was very strange: "How is it that the Demon Sect's leader such a young girl? And why does she have the same name as Wuji?" Nevertheless he returned her salutation and said: "I did not know that Sect Leader was coming so I didn't come out to greet you. I hope you'll forgive me!" Zhao Min said: "You flatter me!"

Ling Xu directed the novice priests to serve tea. Zhao Min sat down. Her subordinates stood a distance behind her, not daring to come within five feet of her for fear of offending her.

Zhang SanFeng had practiced Taosim for a hundred year, it had been a long time since anything affected him emotionally. However, he had a deep bond with his disciples. With the safety of Song Yuanqiao and the others unknown, he was extremely worried, so he immediately asked: "The disciples of this old Taoist overestimated their own abilities, they even dared to challenge top experts from your cult. To date, they've not returned. Would you be so kind as to inform me of their whereabouts?" Zhao Min laughed and said: "Eldest Hero Song, Second Hero Yu, Fourth Hero Zhang and Seventh Hero Mu have fallen into my cult's hands. All of them have suffered some injuries, but their lives are not in danger." Zhang SanFeng said: "Suffered some injuries? More likely they have been poisoned." Zhao Min laughed: "Master Zhang has great confidence in Wudang's kungfu. If you say they have been poisoned, then they are poisoned."

Zhang Sanfeng knew that his disciples were top-class

experts of their time. Even if they were outnumbered and defeated, at least a few would have made it back to report. Since all of them were captured, it was definitely because they had been poisoned. Zhao Min saw that he had guessed what happened, so she casually admitted it. Zhang Sanfeng then asked: "What about my disciple surnamed Yin?" Zhao Min sighed: "Sixth Hero Yin fell into Shaolin's ambush. His four limbs have been broken with Shaolin's Golden Silver Fingers. He won't die but he can no longer move!" From her expression, Zhang Sanfeng knew that this was not empty talk, he was deeply grieved. With a 'wa' sound, he coughed out a mouthful of blood. Zhao Min's followers behind her were delighted, they knew Kong Xiang's sneak attack must have been successful and this Wudang master had suffered a serious injury. Their only fear had been Zhang Sanfeng, now there was nothing left to worry about.

Zhao Min said: "Junior has some advice to give. Would you like to hear it Master Zhang?" Zhang Sanfeng replied: "Please speak up." Zhao Min said: "All land under heaven belongs to the Emperor, the Emperor and his ministers lead the country. The Mongol emperor's power stretches over the whole world. If Master Zhang chooses to serve, His Majesty will surely reward you and Wudang will be greatly honoured. Eldest Hero Song and the rest too will come to no harm." Zhang Sanfeng looked up to the ceiling and coldly said: "Though the Ming Cult has walked the unrighteous path and has committed all sorts of atrocities, you have always opposed the Mongols. When did you submit to the government? This old priest must be really isolated since I have heard nothing about this." Zhao Min said: "Leaving the darkness and embracing the light, it is the mark of a hero to follow the trend of the times. Shaolin's Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others have all submitted and pledged their loyalty to the government. My sect is just following the way the wind is blowing, what's so strange about that?"

Zhang Sanfeng's eyes flashed, he stared directly at Zhao Min and said: "The Yuan (ie Mongol dynasty) are brutal and do great harm to the common people. At present all the heroes of the world have risen up to drive out the barbarians and reclaim our land. It is the aspiration of every descendent of the Yellow Emperor (ie Chinese) to do so – that is the way the wind is truly blowing. Though I am a priest,I still understand the meaning of righteousness. Kong Wen and Kong Zhi are enlightened monks of our time, how could they bow to power? How can your words be so confused?"

Suddenly, a man came out from behind Zhao Min, yelling:"Stupid old monk, you don't know what you are talking about! Wudang Sect is about to be annihilated. Though you're not afraid of death, can it be that the hundred plus priests and disciples on this mountain are not?" This person's speech is full of vigour,with his tall stature and powerful build,he cut an intimidating figure. Zhang Sanfeng recited:"Since olden days, which man has lived and not died? I'll leave a loyalist name in history!*"

(*Translation from <http://www.chinapage.org/poet-e/wentian2e.html>).

This was two lines from a poem by Wen Tianxiang. At the time Wen Tianxiang died,Zhang Sanfeng was still very young. He deeply respected this heroic prime minister. Later on he regretted that at the time his martial arts were still undeveloped,otherwise he definitely would have risked his life to save him. Faced with this difficult situation, he naturally recited the poem. He paused for a moment then continued: "Actually Prime Minister Wen was somewhat obstinate. As for me, I'll just remain loyal,it doesn't matter what the history books say!" He looked at Yu Daiyan thinking:"And yet I hope that my Taichi Fist and Taichi Sword will managed to be passed on to future generations.

Wouldn't it be the same result as Prime Minister Wen taking into consideration his reputation after death? As long as I have a clear conscience, why worry whether my Taichi Fist can be passed to future generations or whether Wudang Sect survives!"

Zhao Min waved her left arm gently. That man bowed and retreated. She smiled faintly and said: "Since Master Zhang is so stubborn, there is no need to say anything else for now. Will you all please come with me!" So saying, she stood up. Four people standing behind her immediately surrounded Zhang Sanfeng. These four people are the powerfully built man, a man in rags, a skinny monk, and a bearded foreigner with blue eyes. Zhang Wuji saw from the way they moved that this four men were no pushovers. He was startled: "How is it that this Miss Zhao has such powerful fighters working for her?" He saw that if he refused to go along with her; the four of them will attack. Zhang Wuji thought: "The enemy are in large numbers, plus they are immoral and shameless people. They're not comparable to the six major sects which attacked Brightness Peak. It won't be easy for me to protect grandteacher and third martial uncle. Even if I defeat a number of them, they won't admit defeat and will definitely attack together. Still, the situation is such that I'll have to risk everything to do so. The best thing to do would be to capture Miss Zhao to force them to give in."

He was just about to step forward to deal with those four when a long laugh was heard from outside. A green man-shaped shadow darted into the hall. This man's movements were as stealthy as a ghost and as swift as lightning. In a flash, he was behind the powerfully built man, and launched a palm attack. The powerfully built man returned a palm without turning around, intending to compete strength. The man in green didn't wait for this move to be completed, his left hand had already tapped the foreigner's shoulder. The

foreigner swiftly dodged sideways and kicked at his lower abdomen. That man had already turned to attack the skinny monk while tilting his body to the side his left palm hit out at the person dressed in rags. In a split second, he had made four attacks, each against a top fighter. Though none of them found it's target, the speed of his techniques was truly beyond imagination. These four people knew they were facing a formidable opponent. Each leapt a few steps backwards, focusing the full attention on the battle.

That person in green ignored the enemy, bowed to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate, junior Wei Yixiao pays his respects to Master Zhang!" This man was really Wei Yixiao. After dealing with the enemies' obstructions, he had doubled his speed to catch up.

Zhang Sanfeng heard him refer to himself as "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate". So he assumed that he was part of Zhao Min's party, and suspected that the forcing of those four people to retreat was just a trick. He said coldly: "Mr. Wei doesn't have to be so polite. I have long heard that the Green Wing Bat King's lightness kungfu is without peer in the world. Now I see that you really live up to your reputation." Wei Yixiao was delighted. He rarely came to the central plains so he was not well known there. Who would have thought that Zhang Sanfeng knew of his lightness kungfu. Bowing, he said: "Venerable Zhang is the North Star of the martial arts community. It is a great honour for me to receive your praise."

He turned around, pointed at Zhao Min and said: "Miss Zhao, what is your purpose in impersonating the Ming Cult and ruining our reputation? Should a real man be so sly and crafty?" Zhao Min giggled: "I am not a man to begin with. So what if I'm sly and crafty - what can you do about it?" The

very first thing Wei Yixiao said was already a mistake. He was unable to come up with a reply. Instead he said: "What do you mean by "first attack Shaolin, then harass Wudang? If you have a enmity with Shaolin and Wudang, the Ming Cult shouldn't interfere. But as you use our name and impersonate us, I, Wei Yixiao cannot ignore it!"

All along, Zhang Sanfeng had not believed that the Ming Cult would surrender to the government after being mortal enemies for a hundred years. After hearing Wei Yixiao's words he understood, thinking: "So this girl is actually pretending to be someone she's not. Though the Demon Cult has a bad reputation, when it comes to major matters they are clear on what has to be done." Zhao Min turned to the powerfully built man and said: "Listen to him blow his own trumpet! Go and try out his skills." The man bowed and replied: "Yes!" Tightening his belt, he walked to the middle of the hall and said: "Bat King Wei, let me have the pleasure of seeing your Cold Ice Cotton Palm!"

Wei Yixiao was startled: "How does this guy know about my Cold Ice Cotton Palm? Since he knows that I have this skill and yet still challenges me, he can't be an easy opponent." He said: "May I know your name?" That man replied: "We are here impersonating Ming Cult, so you think we will reveal our real names? Bat King Wei, you are really stupid to ask this." The people behind Zhao Min burst into laughter. Wei Yixiao said coldly: "That's right, I was stupid to ask. You're simply a running dog of the government, a slave of the foreigners, it is better you don't tell us your real name in order not to disgrace your ancestors. " The man's face turned red and he struck out at Wei Yixiao's chest in anger.

Wei Yixiao dodged quickly and moving as fast as lightning, he stretched out his arm to poke the man's back. He did not use his Cold Ice Cotton Palm yet because he wanted to test

out his opponent's skills first. The man blocked with his left arm and counter-attacked. The man's palm strokes grew faster and more aggressive as the fight progressed. Though Wei Yixiao's internal injuries had been cured by Zhang Wuji, and he no longer has to drink blood to suppress the cold poison, nevertheless he only had had a short time to recover. Now faced with a powerful opponent, coupled with the fact he was fighting in front of the legendary Zhang Sanfeng, he did not dare get careless. So he started to use his Cold Ice Cotton Palm. Their palm strokes gradually slowed as they shifted to competing internal strength. Suddenly there was a yell and a greenish-black object shot through the door heading for that man. This object was larger than a rice sack - it is really odd that there such an enourmous weapon even existed. The man's right palm shot out hitting the object about ten feet away. As his hand made contact, he realised the object was soft yet he could not put a finger on what it was. But a scream was heard - it turned out that there was someone inside. This person has been hit by that man with full power and no mercy, how could his muscles not be smashed and his bones broken? The man was startled and froze in place for a moment. Noiselessly, Wei Yixiao moved up behind him and struck his Da Tui acupoint with his Cold Ice Cotton Palm. The man turned around angrily using his full strength to hit Wei Yixiao's head.

Wei YiXiao laughed and surprisingly he did not move. In the middle of his strike, the man's hand felt weak. Though he made contact with his opponent, the effect was like being gently stroked. Wei Yixiao knew that once the Cold Ice Cotton Palm energy enters the body, the person's strength will dissipate. Nevertheless, in a battle between expert fighters, to allow a powerful opponent to hit his head was an extremely daring thing to do. Therefore, all the spectators were astonished. In the event that the man had been able to

resist the Cold Ice Cotton Palm Wei Yixiao's skull would have been crushed. Wei Yixiao had been a strange person all his life. If there was anything other people are afraid of doing or would refuse to do, he would be more than happy to do it. He had taken advantage of that man's distraction to launch a sneak attack, which was underhand thing to do. Therefore, he daringly let the man hit his head as compensation.

The man dressed in rags tore open the sack and pulled a person out. His face was blood-red having met a violent death under the hand of that powerfully built man. This person is dressed in black and was a member of their party. Somehow he had been caught and imprisoned in the sack. The man in rags was furious, he yelled: "Who was it who cunningly....." Before he could finish, a white sack floated onto his head. He leapt backwards to avoid it, only to see a fat monk grinning at him. Cloth Sack Monk Shuo Bu De had arrived.

Since Shuo Bu De's Qian Kun Yi Qi Sack was thorn to shreds by Zhang Wuji on Guang Ming Peak he had no weapon. He could only quickly fashion a few cloth sacks to use. These were only ordinary sacks unlike the Qian Kun Yi Qi Sack with was impenetrable by swords and sabers. Though his lightness kungfu could not match Wei Yixiao, it was still quite good. Added to the fact that he faced no hindrance along the way, this meant he managed to catch up. Shuo Bu De saluted to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate, Wanderer Cloth Sack Monk Shuo Bu De pays his respects to Venerable Zhang." Zhang SanFeng returned his salute saying: "You must be tired from your long journey." Shuo Bu De said: "My humble cult's sect leader's subordinates the Emissary of Guang Ming, White Browed Eagle King, as well as the other four Wanderers, Five Flags Leaders and other forces have already arrived at WuDang. Master Zhang can just relax and watch the Ming

Cult deal with these shameless imposters.”

He was actually bluffing. Such a large group of Ming Cult's forces could not have arrived so quickly. But when Zhao Min heard it, she could not help frowning slightly while thinking: “Who would have thought that they could arrive so quickly? Who leaked our secret?” Unable to bear it any longer she asked: “Where is your Sect Leader Zhang? Ask him to come and see me.” So saying she turned to Wei Yixiao and looked him in the eye. Her gaze was questioning – asking him where his Sect Leader was. Wei Yixiao laughed and said: “Now you are no longer trying to impersonate us, right?” He too wondered: “Sect Leader has definitely arrived, but where is he right now?” Zhang Wuji was hidden behind Ming Yue, he knew Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bu De have yet to recognize him. He was relieved seeing that these two helpers have arrived. Zhao Min laughed coldly and said: “One venomous bat, one stinking monk, what can you do?”

Just as she said this, a long laugh was heard from the roof on the east of the building, asking: “Reverend Shuo Bu De, has Left Emissary Yang arrived?” This person's voice resonated loudly. The White Browed Eagle King Yin TianZheng had arrived. Shuo Bu De had not yet answered when Yang Xiao's laughter was heard from western roof. Only to hear him laughingly say: “Eagle King, you keep improving as you grow older. You reached here a step faster.” Yin TianZheng laughed: “No need to be so polite, we both arrived at the same time. It'll be splitting hairs to decide who's faster. I fear that you gave way to me for Sect Leader Zhang's sake.” Yang Xiao said: “Definitely not! I've given it my best shot but still failed to beat you.” Enroute to Wudang the two of them had decided to compete to see who was faster. Yin TianZheng's inner power was profound but Yang Xiao's steps were quicker. As a result they were neck to neck with each other from the start to finish. Laughing, both men jumped

down from the roof.

Zhang Sanfeng had long heard of Yin Tianzheng's reputation. Moreover he was Zhang Cuishan's father-in-law. Yang Xiao was also a famous person in the martial world. He took three steps forward, cupped his hands and said: "Zhang Sanfeng respectfully welcomes Brother Yin and Brother Yang." In his heart he wondered: "Yin Tianzheng is the Heavenly Eagle Sect's leader. Why did he say 'for Sect Leader Zhang's sake'?" Yin and Yang bowed to him. Yin Tianzheng said: "I've long heard of Master Zhang distinguished name, but never had the opportunity to meet you. Today, I am very fortunate to do so." Zhang Sanfeng said: "You are both great masters of the era. The arrival of you both has truly made this a great occasion."

Zhao Min saw that more and more Ming Sect experts were arriving and she became even angrier. Though Zhang Wuji had not showed up, she was worried about any schemes he might have put in place. It looked like it would be difficult for her carefully laid plans to succeed. But they had managed to seriously injure Zhang Sanfeng, there would not be another opportunity as good as this. If they did not wrap up matters at Wudang today, once his injuries recover he will be a thorn in their side. With her eyes sweeping around, she sneered: "It is said in the martial arts world that Wudang is a top righteous sect, but how can hearing stories beat seeing with our own eyes? In reality Wudang has ganged up with the Demon Cult. The Demon Cult has simply been lending a hand in all battles, Wudang' martial arts is really nothing worth talking about." Shuo Bu De said: "Miss Zhao, you're only a little girl. When Master Zhang shook the martial arts world, your grandfather probably wasn't even born yet. What does a little kid know?" The ten or so people behind Zhao Min stepped forward glaring at him. Shuo Bu De smiled: "Do you think my words are unfit to be said? My name is Shuo Bu De

(ie cannot to be said), but when I want to saw something I'll say it. What can you do about it?" The skinny monk yelled angrily: "My lady, let your subordinate deal with this big-mouthed monk!" Shuo Bu De called out: "Wonderful! Wonderful! You are an unruly monk, I am also a unruly monk. Let us compete with each other. If Master Zhang gives us some pointers, it'll be more beneficial than 10 years of our own dedicated practice." So saying, he pulled a cloth sack out. The onlookers saw him take out one sack after another, there seemed to be no limit to the number of sacks inside his robe.

Zhao Min shook her head slightly, saying: "Today we have come to seek pointers from Wudang. No matter which fighter from Wudang comes forward, we will gladly compete him. Let's see if Wudang's martial arts are really great or whether it's just an empty reputation. We can settle our differences with the Ming Cult another time. That little devil Zhang Wuji, I want to rip his flesh and peel off his skin to vent my anger." When Zhang Sanfeng heard this he was surprised: "Is Ming Cult's Leader really called Zhang Wuji? And why 'little devil'?" Shuo Bu De laughed and said: "Our Sect Leader Zhang is a young hero. Miss Zhao is just worried that since you're a few years younger than our Sect Leader Zhang, you won't be able to marry him. In my opinion, you're a perfect match....." Before he could finish his sentence, the followers behind Zhao Min yelled out angrily: "Total nonsense!" "Shut up!" "The unruly monk is farting rubbish!" Zhao Min blushed. Her appearance was gentle and delicate, really like a shy young girl. However, this side of her was only seen for a moment. In a split second, her expression turned frosty. Turning to Zhang Sanfeng she said: "Master Zhang, if you're not willing to fight, you only have to admit that Wudang has been deceiving the world all along. We will then clap our hands and leave. Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the rest will also be returned to you." At this

moment, the Iron Hat Priest Zhang Zhong and Yin Yewang arrived. Not long later, Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu too arrived. The Ming Cult now has four more fighters to help them.

Zhao Min realized that if they fight, victory is not assured. The most worrying thing is what sort of scheme Zhang Wuji had hatched. Her gaze swept over the Ming Cult members, thinking: "Zhang Sanfeng is a threat to the government because of his reputation and prestige. He is the figure the martial arts community looks to, the Mount Tai and the North Star. As long as he remains the enemy of the government, they will continue to resist us. But then again, he's already an old man, how much longer can he live? There's no need to take his life today. All we need to do is to disgrace him and destroy Wudang Sect's reputation. Our mission will then be successfully accomplished." She said coldly: "Our purpose for visiting Wudang is to see if Master Zhang's martial arts are real or not. If we want to destroy the Ming Cult, we would have gone to Guang Ming Peak. There would have been no need to come to Mt Wudang to compete martial arts. Can it be that in this world only you Master Zhang who can decide on a winner? I have three servants - one of them has learnt some basic swords skills, another has some shallow inner power, and the last one has learnt some mediocre boxing. Ah Da, Ah Er and Ah San come out. If you defeat my three servants, I'll recognise that Wudang Sect's martial arts really live up to its name. Otherwise the wulin will form its own opinion, there's no need for me to say any more." So saying, she clapped her hands. Three men came out from behind her.

Ah Da was a dried up old man. In his hands was a long sword -this sword was the Heaven Sword. This man's body was slender, his face was set in a frown and full of wrinkles. His expression was one of a person who had just been defeated

in a fight or a person whose wife and children had recently died. Just looking at his face made the onlookers feel sad and want cry for him. Ah Er was fellow of short stature. His head was smooth and oily and totally bald, the Tai Yang pressure points on both sides were depressed to about half an inch deep. Ah San was a strong-looking man with the power of a tiger. His face, hands and neck were bulging muscle. His whole body was full of energy, just like it was about to explode outwards. There was a mole with long hairs growing out of it on his left cheek. Zhang SanFeng, Yin TianZheng, Yang Xiao and the others were startled on seeing these three people.

Zhou Dian said: "Miss Zhao, these three are top experts of the martial arts world. I, Zhou Dian, am not a match for them. How is it that they lower themselves to pretend to be your servants to play a joke on Master Zhang?" Zhao Min replied: "When did I say that they are to experts of the martial arts world? Do you know what their names are?" Zhou Dian paused, then laughed saying: "This is 'Revealing a Sword to the World' the Frowning Divine Gentleman and this is 'Qi Master of All Directions' Bald Heavenly King. As for the other one, the whole world knows he is, hehe..he is... 'Unrivalled Divine Fist' Honourable Elder of Great Strenght."

Zhao Min could not help laughing a little after hearing such rubbish. She said: "How can my cooks and menial servants be a divine gentleman, a heavenly king and an honorable elder? Master Zhang, you compete with Ah San first." Ah San took a step forward, cupped his fist and said: "Master Zhang, please!" He stamped his left foot. With a "kala" sound, three tiles broke. Breaking the tile his foot stepped on was nothing unusual. What was amazing was how the two tiles next to it also broke. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao glanced at each other, thinking: "What a powerful guy!" Ah

Da and Ah Er lowered their heads and retreated without a glance at the crowd. From the moment they entered the hall, these three only stood behind Zhao Min, their gaze lowered to the ground and with a humble expression on their faces. Because of this, nobody paid any attention to them. Unexpectedly, they are truly amazing experts. And yet when they retreated, they changed back into humble looking servants.

Ling Xu was worried about Zhang Sanfeng's injury. He could not take it anymore and shouted: "Can't you see that my grandteacher is injured? How...how can you..." As he said this, he started crying.

Yin Tianzheng thought: "So Master Zhang has been injured. Who was it who injured him? Even if he is not injured, at his age, how can he fight with this person? This person's martial arts are entirely of the hard style. Let me take Master Zhang's place." So he said in a clear voice: "With Master Zhang's position, how can he fight the younger generation? Wouldn't he be the laughing stock of the world?Hrmph, these slaves are not even worth of fighting with me." He knows Ah Da, Ah Er and Ah San are definitely no ordinary people, yet he deliberately tried to infuriate them to gain an advantage for himself. Zhao Min said: "Ah San, what did you do most recently? Tell them. Let's see if you aren't worthy to fight Wudang experts." She emphasized on the word "Wudang". Ah San said:"I didn't do anything much recently. I only fought with a Shaolin monk named Kong Xing defeated his Dragon Claws and cut of his head."

These words caused a sensation within the hall. The Ming Cult members had seen the Divine Monk Kong Xing fight with Zhang Wuji on Guang Ming peak. It was unimaginable that he had been killed by this person. He was definitely a match for Zhang Sanfeng. Yin Tianzheng said loudly: "Great!

You even killed Shaolin's Kong Xing, let me try out your skills." So saying he took two steps forward and took a stance with white eyebrows sticking out, exhibiting awesome power.

Ah San said: "White Browed Eagle King, you are from an evil and unorthodox background, I am also from an evil and unorthodox background. We cannot fight our own people. If you want to fight, we can choose another day to compete. Today my master orders me to try out Wudang's martial arts." He turned to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Master Zhang, if you don't want to come forward, you only need to say so. We won't force you. Once Wudang Sect concedes defeat, there'll be no need to take your life." Zhang Sanfeng smiled faintly. Even though he was severely injured, using his newly created Taiji Fist's philosophy of 'emptiness overcoming fullness', he might not necessarily lose. The difficulty was that after defeating Ah San, he would then have to compete inner power with Ah Er. There was no way out of the situation, he could only focus on the present. He would have to defeat Ah San first then decide what to do.

He walked slowly to the centre of the hall. Turning to Yin Tianzheng he said: "I appreciate Brother Yin's good intentions. In the past few years I've created a new set of fist techniques called 'Taiji Fist'. I believe it is quite different from other forms of martial arts. This benefactor wants to verify that Wudang's martial arts are real. If Brother Yin defeats him, he won't be satisfied. Let me exchange a few stances with him and take the opportunity show you the result of my painstaking work over these years."

When Yin Tianzheng heard this he was happy and yet worried. Zhang Sanfeng spoke with full confidence in his Taiji Fist. He would not have spoken if he could not back up what he said. But he had just suffered a serious injury, even

if the fist technique was excellent, his inner power might be insufficient. Still, he merely cupped his fists and said: "Junior respectfully defers to Master Zhang's divine skill." On seeing Zhang Sanfeng unexpectedly come forward, fear struck Ah San's heart. But he turned his face and said: "Today I'll fight a battle of life or death with this old Taoist. Neither one of us will escape uninjured. This will shake the martial arts world." He immediately drew his breath while staring at Zhang Sanfeng's face. As he held his breath, the sound of bones cracking was heard from all over his body. Everyone was startled. They knew this meant he had achieved the highest level of orthodox Buddhist martial arts. It was the Defeating Demon Diamond Skill.

When Zhang Sanfeng saw this he was startled: "This is no ordinary person! I wonder if my Taiji Fist can defeat him." He slowly lifted up both hands in readiness to fight. Suddenly a disheveled and dirty-looking little novice priest came out from behind Yu Daiyan saying: "Grandteacher, this benefactor wants to witness our Wudang's fist skills. But there's no need for grandteacher to show him yourself. It'll be enough for this disciple to demonstrate a few stances for him." This dirty-faced novice was Zhang Wuji. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao and the rest parted with him only a short time ago. So even though his appearance was now completely different, after hearing his voice they recognized him. The Ming Cult members were overjoyed on seeing their sect leader had been there all along. How could Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan even imagine this?

Zhang SanFeng could not see his face clearly, and so assumed he was Qing Feng. He said: "This benefactor uses Shaolin's Defeating Demon Diamond Skill, an extremely powerful external skill. He is probably a top expert of Western Shaolin. He'll simply crush you to pieces with one blow." Zhang Wuji's right hand pulled Zhang Sanfeng's

sleeve and his left hand gently held Zhang Sanfeng's right hand. He said: "Grandteacher, the Taiji Fist you taught me has never been used before, we don't know if it will work or not. This benefactor is a hard style expert. Let me try out our philosophy of softness overcoming hardness and using the void to resist the solid. Wouldn't that be great?" After saying this, he used his palms to transfer his Art of 9 Yang chi into Zhang Sanfeng's body. At that moment, Zhang Sanfeng felt that the chi emitting from his palms to be so powerful that it without comparison in the whole world. Though it was far from being as refined as his own, the chi was firmly grounded yet soft and was limitless. He started and stared into Zhang Wuji's face. Only to see that his eyes did not shine brightly but had a soft, crystal-like layer in them. This meant that his inner power had reached the ultimate level. Except for his master Reverend Jue Yuan and Hero Guo Jing and a few others, he has never seen the same in anybody else. Of the top experts of the era, except for himself, he can think of no other person who has achieved this stage. In this instant, he mind was plagued with doubts and questions. However, this youth's abundant inner power was being used to treat his injury, he had no evil intentions. So he made his decision. He smiled while saying: "I am feeble and muddle-headed. How can I have any great kungfu to teach you? If you want to learn from this benefactor's super-hard kungfu, that is fine. Be careful." Thinking that this young novice priest is a top expert from another sect sent to help out Wudang, his speech was humble and polite.

Zhang Wuji said: "Grandteacher, I am greatly indebted to you. Even if my body is smashed to powder, I'll not be able to repay my debt to Grandteacher and Martial Uncles. Even though we do not dare claim Wudang's kungfu is matchless, it will not necessarily lose to Western Shaolin. Martial Grandfather, don't worry." He spoke very earnestly, saying "Grandteacher" a few times. Even Zhang Sanfeng found it

strange: "Could it be that he is a Wudang disciple? Cultivating himself secretly just like my master Reverend Jue Yuan?" He slowly released Zhang Wuji's hand, retreated and sat down. Glancing at Yu Daiyan he saw that he was equally bewildered.

Ah San saw Zhang Sanfeng send out this little novice to fight, it was like regarding him with disdain. But if he killed this little novice in one blow, agitate the old Taoist and then only fight with him, there will be a higher chance of coming out victorious. So he just said: "Little kid, watch out!"

Zhang Wuji said: "This fist technique I've just learnt is the product of my grandteacher's sweat and blood. It's called 'Taiji Fist'. I'm only a beginner so I may not have fully comprehended its key points. I'm afraid I won't be able to defeat you within thirty stances. But that is because I'm not yet proficient at it, nothing to do with its inadequacies. This is something you must understand." Instead of getting angry, Ah San laughed, turned to Ah Dan and Ah Er and said: "Eldest Brother, Second Brother, this kid is really barking mad." Ah Er laughed heartily. Ah Da saw that this little novice priest was nobody to be trifled with. He said: "Third Brother, don't take your enemy lightly." Ah San took a step forward, and punched Zhang Wuji's chest with a yell. This move was as quick as lightning. Midway through his strike, his left fist struck out even more quickly, reaching there first, aimed at Zhang Wuji's face. The stance was quite unusual, a true rarity.

Zhang Sanfeng had demonstrated and explained his Taiji Fist about an hour ago. Since then, Zhang Wuji had pondered about and understood its principles. On seeing Ah San's left fist heading his way, he countered with the Taiji Fist stance "Grasping the Sparrow's Tail". With his right leg solid and his left leg empty, he used the "squeeze"

technique and stuck with him. His right palm reached his opponent's left wrist, released his energy at full power. Unable to take the force, Ah San retreated two steps to the side.

The watching crowd gasped in astonishment. With this "Grasping the Sparrow's Tail" stance, the world had seen Taiji Fist used in combat for the first time. Zhang Wuji already had the Art of 9 Yang and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, now he suddenly made use of Taiji Fist's "sticky" technique. Though he learnt the skill no longer than two hours ago, it appeared as if he has studied it all his life. Ah San felt as if his punch which carried with it the force of a hundred thousand catties had simply entered an ocean and disappeared without a trace. At the same time, the force of his punch was directed back at him. At first he was startled but amazement quickly turned to fury. His fist attacked very quickly, the speed was such that it looked like he had more than ten arms with ten fists attacking all at once. His attacks descended like hurricane and rain. The watchers all thought: "No wonder Kong Xing, despite his powerful martial arts, died under his hand." Everyone apart from Zhao Min and her followers were worried for Zhang Wuji's safety.

Zhang Wuji intentionally wanted to show off Wudang's power and prestige. So he did not use his own martial arts. Each stance he used was Zhang Sanfeng's Taiji Fist – Single Whip, Lifting up the Hand, White Crane Spreads Its Wings, Brushing the Knee and the Twisted Step. He executed the stance "Playing the Pipa", with the right pushing down and the left accepting. In this instance, he understood the essence of the Taiji Fist. His stance became just like the moving clouds and flowing water, natural and unrestrained. Ah San felt like he was completely enveloped by Zhang Wuji's hands. He was unable to flee or resist. He could only direct his energy to his back to receive this strike with hard

force. At the same he lashed out with his right fist, hoping that both of them would hit each other intending to take his enemy down with him. Unexpectedly, Zhang Wuji's hands formed a circle, like carrying the cosmos. From this came out a revolving force which was powerful any comparison, making Ah San spin round seven or eight times. Ah San has to use his "Thousand Catties Falling" skill to stop spinning. He was in a wretched state, his face red with embarrassment. The Ming Cult members applauded loudly.

Yang Xiao called out: "Wudang's Taiji Fist is so wonderful. It's a real eye-opener." Zhou Dian laughed: "Ah San, I advice you to change your name to 'Ah Zhuan' (Note: "Zhuan" means to spin/turn)!" Yin Yewang said: "There's nothing to be embarrassed about if you spin a few more circles. Didn't the ancients say of the Thirty-sixth Stratagem is 'spinning is the best strategy'?" (Note: this is a clever play on words by JY. The 36th Stratagem is "zhou wei shang ji - running away is the best option. Yin Yewang changed the word "? zhou" which means "run" to "? zhuan" which mean spin.) Shuo Bu De said: "Among the Heros of Mt Liang was Black Whirlwind. That whirlwind spun around too!" (Note: This is from Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh. The Black Whirlwind refers to Li Kui. I'm not familiar with the story, so don't ask me for details)

In his fury, Ah San's face changed from red to green. Yelling angrily, he threw himself forward in attack. His left hand switched between a fist to a palm and back again irregularly. His right hand used purely finger techniques - snatching and poking, hooking and digging, all five fingers extended like judge's brushes, like pressure point sealing pegs, like sabers and swords, like spears and lances, all extremely offensive moves. Zhang Wuji was not yet familiar with the Taiji Fist techniques. Faced with this barrage, he was unable to cope and his movements became erratic. Suddenly, part of his

sleeve was torn off. He could only utilise his lightness kungfu to dash out of the way. Faced with this strange finger technique he only thing he could do was dodge. Ah San yelled and chased him. There was no where for Zhang Wuji to escape his fingers combined with lightness kungfu. While dodging, Zhang Wuji thought: "If I keep running without fighting, wouldn't that be losing? Since I'm not yet proficient at Taiji Fist, I'll have to use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi."

He turned around, both hands executed Taiji Fist's defensive stance "Wild Horse's Mane". His left hand unleashed Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi techniques. Ah San's right hand was moving to jab Zhang Wuji's shoulder. Instead, there was a sound of laughter as he ended up poking his own left arm. The pain was so great that he saw stars, he almost could not move his left arm. Yang Xiao saw that this was not a Taiji Fist stance so he hurriedly yelled: "Taiji Fist is really amazing!" Ah San shouted in pain and anger: "What Taiji Fist? That was sorcery!" He then attacked three times consecutively. Zhang Wuji jumped away, he saw Ah San stretch out his arm to jab him, he again used his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. With a "tuo" sound, he redirected Ah San's two fingers straight into a pillar, embedding them deeply. Everyone was shocked and yet found it very funny.

Amidst the laughter, Yu Daiyan said in a harsh voice: "Stop! Is that Shaolin's Diamond Finger?" (Note: Diamond Finger = Golden Steel Finger in Meh's translation). Zhang Wuji jumped when he heard the words "Shaolin's Diamond Finger". He remembered that Yu Daiyan was injured by Shaolin's Diamond Finger. For the past twenty years, Wudang Sect had harbored a deep resentment towards Shaolin. It looked like the real perpetrator was this man. Only to hear Ah San say coldly: "So what if it is the Diamond Finger? It's your own fault for being so stubborn and not giving up the Dragon Sabre. How does it feel to be paralysed

for the last twenty years?" Yu Daiyan harshly said: "Thank you for revealing the truth today. So it is Western Shaolin who is responsible for maiming me. It's a pity...it's a pity about fifth brother." As he said these words, he choked with a sob.

Zhang Cuishan committed suicide because he could not face his martial brother after finding out that Yu Daiyan was injured by Yin Susu's silver needles. In actual fact, after Yu Daiyan was injured with the silver needles Yin Susu entrusted the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to send him back to Wudang. After a month's treatment, he would have recovered from the poison. Unfortunately, his four limbs were broken with the Diamond Fingers. If they had found this culprit at that time, Zhang Cuishan and his wife would not have died a tragic death. Yu Daiyan was filled with grief about his innocent martial brother's death while also hating his crippled condition. His heart was filled with hatred. When Zhang Wuji heard their words, he immediately understood what had happened. When he was young he heard his father say a 'Huo Gong Tou Tuo' of Shaolin Temple secretly learnt martial arts and killed the head of the Damo Hall Reverend Ku Zhi. The top Shaolin experts then had a huge argument. As a result, Reverend Ku Wei went to the Western Regions and set up Western Shaolin. It seemed that this person was a descendant of Ku Wei.

Zhang Sanfeng said: "This benefactor is excessively vicious. We never imagined that there is a person like you among Reverend Ku Wei's descendants." Ah San grinned ferociously and said: "What kind of thing is Ku Wei?"

When Zhang Sanfeng heard this, he struck with sudden realization. After Yu Daiyan had been injured by the Diamond Fingers, Wudang Sect sent people to ask Shaolin for an explanation. The Abbot of Shaolin resolutely denied

any involvement. They then suspected Western Shaolin. But after a few years of making enquiries, they got to know that Western Shaolin had now changed. All disciples only studied Buddhism and did not know martial arts. He knew that if Ah San was a Western Shaolin disciple, he would never curse the founder of his sect. So he said in a clear voice: “No wonder! This benefactor is Huo Gong Tou Tuo's (the kitchen worker monk – see Athena's translation of Chapter 2 for details) descendant. Not only did you learn his martial arts, but you also picked up his evil nature! Is Kong Xiang your martial brother?”

Ah San replied: “Right! He is my martial brother. His name is not Kong Xiang, but is Gang Xiang. Master Zhang, how does my Diamond Prajana Palm compare with your Wudang palm skills?” Yu Daiyan said harshly: “Not even close! His skull was crushed with one palm strike from my master. With his mediocre skills how dare he come up against my master! Death is really too light for him!”

Ah San let out a yell and rushed out to attack. Zhang Wuji used the “Apparent Closure” stance of the Taiji Fist to block him and said: “Ah San, give me the ‘Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment!’” So saying he stretched out his right hand. Ah San was shocked: “Our sect's bone healing medicine is such a closely kept secret that even our sect's ordinary disciples don't know about it. Where did this little novice priest hear about it?”

How could he know that Hu Qingniu's “Medical Classic”, stated that in the Western Regions there existed an external school of martial arts which branched out from Shaolin. Its techniques were extremely weird, no medicine can treat bones broken by it. The only exception was the school's “Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment. However, no one else knew how to make this ointment. Zhang Wuji only wanted to

test him by saying this. When he saw Ah San's expression change, he knew he had guessed correctly. He said clearly: "Give it to me!" He thought about his parent's deaths as well the suffering of his two martial uncles. Feeling great hatred, he had no desire to continue talking to him. Even though Ah San's martial arts were slightly inferior, when he executed the powerful Diamond Fingers, Zhang Wuji could only avoid his strokes but was unable to counter-attack. As long as he remained careful towards Zhang Wuji's weird techniques he should win this fight. He stepped forward and yelled: "Kowtow to me three times and I'll spare you, or else you'll end up like the one named Yu." Zhang Wuji wanted to wrest his "Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment" away from him. However, he had no idea how to deal with the Diamond Fingers. Though he could use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to injure Ah San, he would still be unable to force him to hand over the ointment. Then Zhang Sanfeng said: "Child, come here!" Zhang Wuji replied: "Yes, Grandteacher." He walked over to stand in front of him.

Zhang SanFeng said: "Use intention not force. Taiji is circular and continuous, it does not break off. Take control of the situation and let your opponent break his own form. Each stance and each form is linked together like the Chang Jiang (ie Yangtze River), a never-ending torrent. " He realized that Zhang Wuji had understood the secret of Taiji. The problem was that his martial arts were too powerful so his stances contained distinct edges and corners rendering him unable to accomplish the Taiji Fist concept of "continuous circles". This was the crux of Taiji philosophy. Zhang Wuji's martial arts were profound, after hearing Zhang Sanfeng's words, he immediately understood. He envisioned the circular Taji Diagram (ie the famous Yin-Yang symbol) and the philosophy of Yin and Yang.

Ah San laughed coldly: "Isn't that too late to learn martial

arts now?" Zhang Wuji raised his eyebrows and said: "There's just enough time. Let me test out a few moves with you." As he said this he turned around, his right hand moving in a circular manner, sweeping at Ah San's face. This was Taiji Fist's "Tall Mounted Scout" stance. Ah San's five fingers came together, assuming the shape of a knife, chopping towards him. Zhang Wuji countered with the "Double Wind Piercing Ear" stance, his two hands formed a circle. He now understood and used the "continuous circles" concept that Zhang Sanfeng had taught him. He executed left circles and right circles, circles within circles, large circles, small circles, flat circles, vertical circles, perfect circles, slanting circles - each one a Taiji circle, surrounding Ah San and pushing him. Unable to withstand it, Ah San staggered around like a drunkard.

Suddenly, Ah San's five fingers shot out violently. Zhang Wuji used the "Cloud Hand" stance, right hand high and left hand low forming a circle surrounding his arm and applied the Art of Nine Yang power. With a "krak" sound, all the bones on Ah San's right arm were broken. The power of the Art of Nine Yang was really frightening. In one moment, Ah San's arm was broken in six or seven places. The Taiji Fist alone without the Art of Nine Yang was not capable of generating such power. Zhang Wuji hated his wickedness so he employed the "Cloud Hands" stance repetitively. Before the first circle was completed, the second circle began. With another "krak" sound, Ah San's left arm was broken. This was followed by more "krak" sounds as both his legs were also broken. In his whole life, Zhang Wuji has never been so vicious to his opponents. But this person caused his parent's deaths and his third and sixth uncles' suffering. If he had not wanted to obtain the "Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment" from Ah San, he would have taken his life.

Ah San screamed and fell to the ground. One of Zhao Min's

subordinates rushed out, picked him up and retreated. The spectators were totally astonished by Zhang Wuji's power. Even the Ming Cult experts forgot to applaud. The bald Ah Er then dashed forward, his right palm shot out towards Zhang Wuji's chest. Before the palm arrived, Zhang Wuji felt his breath constricted. He immediately used the "Slant Flying Form" to redirect the palm. Without a sound the bald old man landed firmly on the ground. With full concentration he launched one palm attack after another, each attack accompanied with incomparable inner power.

Zhang Wuji saw his palm strokes were of the same origin as Ah San's. From his age he is probably Ah San's older martial brother. Though he was not as quick and agile as Ah San, he was steadier. Zhang Wuji used Taiji Fist's "stick", "divert" and "push" forms intending push Ah Er off balance. Unexpectedly, this person's inner strength was extremely powerful, he himself ended up stumbling. Zhang Wuji thought: "Let me see whether your Western Shaolin's inner power is greater or my Art of Nine Yang is greater." Seeing a palm coming towards him, he used brute force to meet that palm directly. Both palms met with a thunderous clash, both their bodies swayed. Zhang Sanfeng inwardly yelled: "Not good! When fighting with brute force, the more powerful one will win. It's completely opposite to the principle of Taiji Fist. This baldie's inner power is very powerful, rarely seen in the martial arts world. The kid will suffer severe injuries under his palm." At this moment, the combatant's palms came crashing together a second time. Ah Er's body wobbled and he retreated one step while Zhang Wuji stood firm and steady.

At the pinnacle of both arts, the Art of Nine Yang and Shaolin internal energy were equal. But the founder of the "Diamond School" was a kitchen worker monk who learnt martial arts on the sly without proper instruction. It is possible to learn

external forms and weapons techniques by watching. However, inner power is practiced within the body. No matter how long a person watches, he will still be unable to see how energy is regulated and moved through the body. That is why it is possible to secretly learn external martial arts but impossible to learn internal arts. The Diamond School's external arts were extremely powerful, on par with orthodox Shaolin. However, their internal arts are very far behind. Ah Er was a unique member of the "Diamond School". Born with powerful strength, he took a different course from the rest and cultivated profound inner power. His achievements in this category have long surpassed that of his school's founder, the kitchen worker monk. Few people have managed to last more than three stances against him. Now while fighting hard against him, he was forced a step backwards by Zhang Wuji. He was both shocked and angry. He took a deep breath and used both palms to attack Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji called out: "Sixth Uncle Yin, watch me help you vent your anger." It turned out that Yin Liting, Yang Buhui and Xiao Zhao have already arrived at Wudang Mountain.

Zhang Wuji yelled and brought his right fist out. With a thunderous crash, the bald Ah Er retreated three steps, his eyes bulged out and blood gurgled within his chest. Zhang Wuji called: "Sixth Uncle Yin, was this baldie among your attackers?" Yin Liting said: "Yes! This person was the leader." Only to hear cracking sounds coming from the bones in Ah Er's body as he gathered his energy. Yu Daiyan knew Ah Er's inner strength was very powerful. By generating his energy like that, his palm force will be no trivial matter and extremely difficult to deal with. He yelled: "Attack while he is crossing the river!" His meaning was not to wait for Ah Er to finish gathering his strength but to attack first. Zhang Wuji replied: "Yes!" He took a step forward but did not strike. Ah Er raised his arms, and with earth-shattering force struck

out. Zhang Wuji inhaled and circulated his internal chi, his right palm swept out, received the attack, and redirected the force back to him. These two forces combined to become one. Ah Er yelled, his body was flung backwards right through the wall as if thrown by a catapult. The shocked onlookers turned pale. A man carried Ah Er through the hole in the wall and laid him on the ground. This person was short and fat, as round as a drum. His appearance was very comical. Yet, his movements were very agile. He was the Ming Cult's Earth Banner Chief Yan Yuan. Ah Er's arms, ribs and shoulder joints had been broken by his own hard energy. After putting Ah Er down, Yan Yuan turned to Zhang Wuji and bowed. He then excited through the hole in the wall looking like a fat mouse.

When Zhao Min saw that this little novice priest defeated two of her to experts, she had become suspicious. After seeing Yan Yuan bow to him, recognition dawned onto her. He secretly scolded herself: "I deserve to die! I thought I had arrived ahead of him. I never expected that he'll go as far as to pretend to be an apprentice priest, causing trouble here and spoiling my great plans." She immediately said gently: "Sect Leader Zhang, why do you lower yourself by disguising as a little apprentice priest? You keep saying grandteacher this and grandteacher that, yet you're not embarrassed."

Zhang Wuji saw that she had recognized him. So he said clearly: "My late father Cuishan was Grandteacher's fifth disciple. If I don't call him 'Grandteacher', what can I call him? What's there to be embarrassed about?" He turned around, faced Zhang Sanfeng, knelt down and kowtowed saying: "Zhang Wuji pays his respects to Grandteacher and Third Martial Uncle. Because of the urgent situation, I didn't have time to report to you. Please forgive me for deceiving you." Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan were filled with joyous

shock. Never in their wildest imagination did they think that this youngster was the same sickly child of many years ago. Zhang Sanfeng laughed loudly, stretched out his hand to help him up, saying: "Good boy, you didn't die. Cuishan has a descendant." The fact that Zhang Wuji's martial arts were so amazing was secondary. Believing that Zhang Wuji had died long ago, Zhang Sanfeng was happiest over the fact that he was still alive. His heart overflowed with joy. He turned to Yin Tianzheng and said: "Brother Yin, congratulations for having such a great grandson." Yin Tianzheng laughingly replied: "Master Zhang, congratulations on having such a wonderful grand-disciple."

Zhao Min cursed: "What wonderful grandson? What wonderful grand-disciple? Just two old men bringing up a cunning and sly little devil. Ah Da, go and try out his sword skills." The frown-faced Ah Da answered: "Yes!" With a brushing sound, he pulled out the Heaven Sword. Everyone stared at the gleaming sword radiating in power. Zhang Wuji said: "This sword belongs to E-Mei. How did it fall into your hands?" Zhao Min spat: "Little devil, what do you know? The old nun Mie Jue stole this sword from my family. The sword has simply been returned to its true owner. What has the Heaven Sword got to do with E-Mei Sect?" Zhang Wuji had no knowledge of the origins of the Heaven Sword. He was unable to answer her. So he immediately changed the subject: "Miss Zhao, please give me the 'Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment'. Once my third and sixth martial uncles' broken limbs are healed, we can just let bygones be bygones" Zhao Min said: "Hrmph! Let bygones be bygones? Talk is cheap. Do you know where Shaolin's Kong Wen and Kong Zhi; Wudang's Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the rest are?" Zhang Wuji shook his head saying: "I don't know. Could you please tell me?"

Zhao Min laughed coldly: "Why should I tell you? Are you

going to repeat your disgraceful conduct in the Green Willow Manor prison?" As she said this she blushed. Thinking about the incident made her furious and yet bashful at the same time. Zhang Wuji blushed when heard her say "disgraceful conduct". That day, in order to save the Ming Cult fighters he had had no choice but to resort to such tactics - he had tickled the base of her foot with his hand. Actually he had had no inappropriate thoughts however, there was a barrier between men and women. This incident had to be kept a secret from the crowd - it would be a disaster if they assumed that he had violated a young girl. Instead of offering an explanation he said: "Miss Zhao, are you going to give me the 'Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment'?" Zhao Min laughed coldly and said: "I can easily give you the 'Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment'. If you do three things for me, I'll offer it up to you with both hands." Zhang Wuji asked: "What three things?" Zhao Min replied: "I haven't thought of them yet. When I think of them I'll tell you what to do." Zhang Wuji said: "That won't do. What if you ask me to commit suicide or become a pig or dog?" Zhao Min laughed: "I won't ask you to commit suicide. I also won't ask you to become a pig or a dog. Hehe... even if you're willing to you lack the ability." Zhang Wuji said: "You'll have to tell me what you want first. As long as it's not anything dishonourable and within my abilities, there can be no harm obliging you."

Zhao Min was just about to reply when she caught sight of an pearl ornament in Xiao Zhao's hair. It was none other than the hair ornament that she had given to Zhang Wuji. She couldn't help but become furious. She saw that Xiao Zhao was a beautiful girl with a sweet smile. Though she was still young , she was like a lotus flower in the glow of dawn, raising feelings of tender affection in people's hearts. Her heart was filled with even greater hatred. Gritting her teeth she said to Ah Da: "Go and cut off both his arms!" Ah

Da replied: "Yes!" He raised the Heaven Sword, took a step forward and said: "Sect Leader Zhang, my lady orders me to cut off both your arms."

Zhou Dian had been controlling himself for a long time. But now he was unable to bear it anymore. He cursed: "Your mother's farting crap! Why don't you cut your own arm off?" Ah Da's expression was one of worry and anxiety. He bitterly said: "You do have a point there." Zhou Dian was delighted. He said loudly: "Cut it off then." Ah Da said: "There's no need to rush." Zhang Wuji was quietly fretting. The Heaven Sword was extremely sharp, any weapon that collides with it will break. The only thing to do was to use Qian Jun Da Nuo Yi to snatch the sword from him. However, it was extremely risky to use his bare hands to do so. If his opponent's sword technique was unusual and he was unable to anticipate the moves he would be in trouble. No matter which part of his arm comes into contact with the sword edge, it will immediately be chopped off. He had no idea what to do. Suddenly Zhang Sanfeng said: "Wuji, you've already learned Taiji Fist, I also have a Taiji Sword skill. There's no harm in teaching it to you so you can use it to match swords with this benefactor." Zhang Wuji said joyfully: "Thank you Grandteacher." He turned to Ah Da and said: "Elder, I'm not familiar with swordsmanship. I'll have to ask my grandteacher for some pointers before crossing swords with you."

Ah Da was actually secretly afraid of Zhang Wuji. Despite the advantage of having the Heaven Sword, he could not be sure of victory. He was delighted to hear that Zhang Wuji was just about to learn swordsmanship. In his heart he felt that however wonderful the sword techniques were, Zhang Wuji would definitely be unfamiliar with it. Sword techniques required careful and diligent study. It would take at least ten to twenty years of dedicated practice before a person could proficiently use it in a fight. He nodded his

head and said: "Go and learn. I'll wait here for you. Is four hours enough?" Zhang Sanfeng said: "There's no need to go elsewhere. I'll teach him here, that way everything will be fresh in his mind. It'll take less than an hour." At these words, with the exception of Zhang Wuji, everyone was stunned. They could not believe their ears and thought: "No matter how profound and mysterious Wudang Sect's Taiji Sword Art is, an enemy watching him teach would be able to pick up and understand its intricacies. The skill will no longer be a secret." Ah Da said: "That's fine. I'll go outside and wait." He did not want to gain an advantage this way. Despite his position as a servant, he conducted himself as an eminent master of the martial arts world. Zhang Sanfeng said: "That won't be necessary. This is the first time this new sword skill of mine sees action. I've no idea whether it will be any use at all. You're a famous swordsman - I invite you to point out the flaws of this sword art." At this time Yang Xiao suddenly realized something. He said clearly: "So you're the 'Eight Arm Divine Swordsman' Fang Dongbai. You were once an elder of the Beggar Sect - how did you become a lowly servant?" The Ming Cult members listened with shock. Zhou Dian said: "Aren't you supposed to be dead? This...this...how is this possible?"

Ah Da sighed, lowered his head and said: "The old beggar is almost dead. Why bring up the past? I am no longer a Beggar Sect Elder." Those of the older generation know that Eight Arm Divine Swordsman Fang Dongbai was the head of the four elders of the Beggar Sect. He was famous throughout the martial arts world for his swordsmanship. He was so unusually fast with the sword that it seemed like he had seven or eight arms, this earned him his nickname. He was said to have died of a serious illness over ten years ago. At that time everyone thought it was a great pity. It was quite a shock to see that he was still among the living. Zhang Sanfeng said: "It is an immeasurable honour for the

Eight-Armed Divine Swordsman to give a few pointers. Wuji, do you have a sword?" Xiao Zhao stepped forward and presented the wooden Heaven Sword Zhang Wuji had taken from Zhao Min to him. Zhang Sanfeng picked it up and laughed: "A wooden sword? Isn't this used for drawing talismans and expelling demons?" He stood up with the sword in his left hand and his right hand forming sword forms. Both hands made a loop and he slowly raised them. This opening form was followed by "Encase the Moon with Three Rings", "Biggest Star in the Big Dipper", "Swallow Skims the Water", "Left Block", "Right Block"...each form smoothly following the other. At the fifty-third stance "The Compass" his hands simultaneously drew a circle followed by the fifty-fourth form "Grasping the Sword and Returning to the Beginning". Zhang Wuji did not try to remember each stance and form. Instead, he focused on the spirit of the unbroken, flowing sword. At the end of Zhang Sanfeng's demonstration, not a single person applauded. Everyone was thinking: "How can such a slow and gentle sword art be used to fight an enemy?" Then they thought: "Master Zhang must have deliberately slowed down for Zhang Wuji to learn."

Only to hear Zhang Sanfeng say: "Have you seen everything clearly?" Zhang Wuji answered: "Yes." Zhang Sanfeng asked: "Do you remember everything?" Zhang Wuji answered: "I've already forgotten a small portion." Zhang Sanfeng said: "Good. Think about it for a while." Zhang Wuji lowered his head in contemplation. After a while, Zhang Sanfeng asked: "What about now?" Zhang Wuji replied: "I've forgotten a large portion."

Zhou Dian yelled out: "Damm! He's forgetting more and more as time passes. Master Zhang, this sword art of yours is too profound. How can anyone remember it all after seeing it only once? Please demonstrate it once more for our sect

leader." Zhang Sanfeng smiled and said: "Alright, I'll demonstrate it once more." He picked up the sword and went through the moves again. After watching a few stances, the spectators were surprised. The stances in the second performance were completely different from the stances in the first. Zhou Dian yelled: "Damm, damm! This will make him even more confused." Zhang Sanfeng drew a full circle, then he asked: "Child, what about now?" Zhang Wuji replied: "I still haven't forgotten three stances." Zhang Sanfeng nodded his head, put down the sword and returned to his seat. Zhang Wuji paced slowly in a circle. He contemplated a while, then slowly turned a half-circle. He then lifted his head up and with a joyous expression, said: "I've completely forgotten it all, not a trace is left." Zhang Sanfeng said: "Not bad, not bad! You forgot it very quickly. You can now ask the Eight Armed Divine Swordsman to give you some pointers!" After saying this he gave the wooden sword to him. Zhang Wuji accepted it with a bow. He turned to Fang Dongbai and said: "Elder Fang please." Zhou Dian scratched his head, his heart heavy with worry. Fang Dongbai stepped forward and said: "Sorry for offending you!" His gleaming sword stabbed forward with a 'chi' sound. His internal strenght was not inferior to Ah Er's. The onlookers were shocked, thinking that even without the Heaven Sword, an ordinary sword wielded with such powerful inner strenght would be extremely destructive. The "Divine Swordsman" was really not an empty name.

Zhang Wuji drew a half-circle to counter, pushing his wooden sword against the flat of the Heaven Sword while channelling his inner strenght. The Heaven Sword was forced downwards. Fang Dongbai praised: "Great sword skills!" He turned his wrist and stabbed at his left arm. Zhang Wuji countered with a circular movement. With a clapping sound, the two swords met and both parties leapt backwards. Fang Dongbai's Heaven Sword vibrated with a

'weeiing' sound, it continued for sometime without stopping. One weapon was a precious sword and the other a wooden sword. Yet when they collided there was no difference between the two swords. With this stance Zhang Wuji used bluntness to defeat sharpness, displaying the essence of the Taiji Sword. What Zhang Sanfeng taught him was "sword intention", not "sword techniques". He had to forget all the stances completely in order to grasp the essence. During combat, intention directs the sword producing countless variations with no limits. However, if one or two techniques remained in the memory, they will restrain the mind and the sword skills will not be pure. Top experts like Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng vaguely understood the concept. Zhou Dian's lack of understanding was the cause of his anxiety. At this time the sounds of the battle echoed through the hall. Fang Dongbai's aggressive sword technique and deep internal strength utilised the sharp sword to produce extremely exquisite swordplay. Sword chi rippled through the hall unrestrained. The onlookers felt like they were caught in a snow-storm, the cold energy chilling them to the bone. Amid all this Zhang Wuji's sword drew one circle after another. Each stance, whether attacking or defending, within a circle. His mind was clear, using intention to guide the sword. The wooden sword seemed to give out thin threads, winding round and round the Heaven Sword. More and more of these threads appeared forming a ball around the Heaven Sword. After more than two hundred stances, Fang Dongbai's sword was becoming more sluggish. The sword in his hand felt heavier and heavier - five cattys, six cattys, seven cattys..... ten cattys, twenty cattys..... He thrust the sword but had no strength to back it up. The wooden sword forced it to spin a couple of circles.

The longer he fought, the more afraid Fang Dongbai became. After three hundred or more stances the two swords

had not clashed. Such a thing had never before happened in his whole life. It was as if his opponent had unfurled a gigantic net which was getting smaller and smaller. Fang Dongbai alternated between six or seven different sword styles. The variations were so complex that the spectators felt dizzy just watching him. Throughout the battle Zhang Wuji simply drew circles with the sword. With the exception of Zhang Sanfeng, none of the spectators could see which of his stances were offensive and which were defensive. This Taiji Sword was comprised of all sorts of circles. It was really made up of only one stance but there was no limit to its uses. A loud hiss was heard from Fang Dongbai. He thrust the Heaven Sword forward with every ounce of energy he had left, putting everything into this one strike.

Recognising the danger of the situation, Zhang Wuji used his sword to block. With great skill, Fang Dongbai adjusted his stance slightly. The Heaven Sword now attacked from the side. With a 'qing' sound, six inches of the wooden sword was cut off. The minor obstruction was not enough to hold back the Heaven Sword and it stabbed straight at Zhang Wuji's chest.

In shock, Zhang Wuji shot his left hand out and caught the sword between his index and middle fingers. At the same time, the broken wooden sword in his right hand chooped down on Fang Dongbai's right arm. Though it was a wooden sword, when backed with the power of the Art of 9 Yang it was no different from a steel blade. Fang Dongbai tried to pull his right arm back but Zhang Wuji's two fingers held onto the Heaven Sword with an iron-grip. In this circumstances, his only option was to let go of the Heaven Sword and jump away. Only to hear Zhang Wuji yell: "Let go!" Fang Dongbai gritted his teeth but held on to the sword. In a blink of an eye a 'pa' sound was heard. His arm, still holding on to the sword, was cut off by the wooden

sword. Fang Dongbai refused to let go of the sword because he wanted to protect it. He stretched out his left hand and snatched the falling right arm out of the air. Though the arm had left its body, its five fingers still held on firmly to the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji was stunned at this display of courage. He also felt regret. So he did not try to take the sword. Fang Dongbai walked in front of Zhao Min, bowed and said: "My lady, your servant is useless. I should be punished." Zhao Min completely ignored him. She said: "Today we'll give Sect Leader Zhang face and let Wudang Sect off." She waved her right hand saying: "Let's go!" Her subordinates carried Fang Dongbai, Ah Er and Ah San and left the hall. Zhang Wuji yelled: "Hold on! If you don't leave the Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment behind, don't even think about leaving Wudang Mountain." He jumped forward and made a grab for Zhao Min's shoulder. His hand was about a foot away from Zhao Min's shoulder when he felt palm wind heading towards the left and right side of his body. These palms were soundless and appeared out of no where. In shock, Zhang Wuji brought both his palms out. His right hand met the palm attacking on his right and his left hand met the palm attacking from the left. The four palms clashed at the same time. Only to feel a strange powerful energy. The palm force contained a matchless cold yin energy he knew well. It was no other than the "Xuan Ming Divine Palm" which tormented him in his youth. Startled, Zhang Wuji channelled his Art of 9 Yang chi. Suddenly, two palms hit him simultaneously on the left and right side of his body. With a grunt, Zhang Wuji was thrown backwards. He saw that his attackers were two tall and skinny old men. With one hand, they clashed palms with Zhang Wuji and while the other soundlessly struck his body. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao yelled in anger and rushed forward. The two old men struck out again. There was a crashing sound. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao retreated a few steps, their chests feeling constricted and cold energy

penetrating their bones. The bodies of the two old men swayed a little. The man on the right laughed coldly: "The famous names of Ming Sect are really nothing!" Turning around, they left protecting Zhao Min.

End of Chapter 24.

Chapter 25 - Lighting a blazing fire to burn the sky.

(Translated by Huang Rong and Foxs, editing by Han Solo and Eliza Bennet)



On the fifteenth of the eighth month, a huge bonfire was built in front of the altar in the middle of the Butterfly Valley. Zhang Wuji climbed on top of the altar to pledge to drive the Yuan invaders out, to do good and shun evil, and reaffirming the original Cult teaching. That day the fire in front of the altar was blazing high, the fragrance of the incense spread everywhere, the Ming Cult flourished far beyond in the time past.

(Huang Rong, edited by Han Solo)

Everyone was worried about Zhang Wuji's injury so they did not attend to the pursuit and instead effusively surrounded him. Wuji showed a faint smile, and gently swung his right hand downward once to demonstrate that he was not injured at all. As the Nine Yang Divine Art inside his body began to expel the Yin cold energy of the Xuan Ming Divine Palm [editors note: using Xuan Ming divine palm to match previous translations] from the body, white jets of steam starts to emit hastily and continuously out from the top of his head which now looked like a steamer. When he untied the coat, both sides of his body have a clear deep black palm mark imprinted on. Under the revolutions of the Nine Yang Divine Art, the color of the two palm marks changed from black to purple, from purple changed into ashen grey, until finally the two palm marks were all gone after around an hour. In the past, Wuji had spent several years yet unable to fully drive the poison of the Xuan Ming Divine Palm out of his body, this time, in only a short while it was eliminated easily and completely.

He stood up, said: "Although this event was very dangerous, but eventually we can recognize our enemy's appearances." When the Xuan Ming Elders clashed palms with Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, they had already been attacked by the Nine Yang Divine Art of Zhang Wuji, so the Yin poison in their palm power was less than two tenths of its normal self, but both Yang and Wei still had to sit in meditation and circulating their energy for over a half of the day in order to totally expel the Yin poison from their bodies. Zhang Wuji cared for his martial grandfather's wound, Zhang Sanfeng said: "The fireworker monk's internal cultivation technique was not good, even though his external technique was fierce, it was still far inferior to the Xuan Ming Divine Palm, my wound is not ominous."

At that time, the Sharp Metal Flag's General Flag Herald Wu Jingcao entered the hall and reported that all the intruding enemies had withdrawn from the Wudang mountain. Yu Daiyan ordered the Taoist who was tasked with managing guests to prepare a vegetarian feast in honour of the members of the Ming Cult. During the feast, Zhang Wuji turned toward Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan to report on what had happened to himself since the separation. Everybody exclaimed after hearing the story. Zhang Sanfeng said: "That year, in this Wudang temple, I clashed a palm with an old man, but during that time he disguised himself as a Mongolia military officer so I don't know which one he is in those two old men. It's really ashamed that up to now we still have not been able to know thoroughly about our enemy." Yang Xiao said: "I don't know what is the origin of that young girl surnamed Zhao that even elite fighters such as the Xuan Ming Elders are willing to accept her command." Everybody made many guesses but could not come to a conclusion on this matter.

Zhang Wuji said: "At the moment, there are two important tasks. The first one is obtaining the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste to well treat Yu third elder martial uncle's and Yu sixth martial uncle's injuries. The second one is finding out eldest martial uncle Song and his companions' whereabouts. The solutions to both matters is in the hands of that girl surnamed Zhao." Yu Daiyan said with a strained smile: "I've been disabled for twenty years so even if you really had miraculous pills and divine medicines, my injury would not be able to be cured. Rescuing the eldest brother and the sixth younger brother is more important." Zhang Wuji said: "We cannot delay anymore, Left Herald Yang, Bat King Wei and Shuo Bude you three please descend the mountain together with me to trace the enemy. The 5 General Flag Vice Heralds of the 5 Basic Element Flags, each to go to one of the five main schools including Emei,

Huashan, Kunlun, Kongtong and Fujian Southern Shaolin to contact and inquire about the news. Grandfather and uncle please proceed to Jiangnan to reorganize the members of the Heavenly Hawk Flag. Priest Tie Guan, mister Zhou, great monk Peng and the Five Basic Element General Flag Heralds temporarily stay on at the Wudang mountain and listen to the orders of my martial grandfather.”

During the feast, he casually gave the instructions. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others all stood up and bowed their bodies to accept the orders. Initially Zhang Sanfeng had doubted that such a young man as Zhang Wuji being could unite and command the hero group, but seeing Zhang Wuji giving orders which great heroes in wulin such as Yin Tianzheng obeyed without any hesitation, he felt overjoyed and thought to himself: “He can learn my Taiji fist, Taiji swordsmanship, that’s only because he has a good internal energy background and a strong perceptivity, although it’s hard to do so, that is still not really valuable. But as for he being able to control the great devils of the Ming cult, the Heavenly Hawk sect, lead them into the upright path, that’s really a big matter. Cuishan has a heir, Cuishan has a fine heir already. [Note: spoken with pride that Zhang Cui Shan had a fine heir]” Thinking as far as here, he couldn’t help stroking his beard and smiling. Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude the four people hastily finished their meal and then immediately said good-bye to Zhang Sanfeng and went down the mountain to search for Zhao Min’s track.

Yin Tianzheng and others send the four people off to the front of the mountain before returning. Yang Buhui was attached to his father and didn’t want to part from him so she accompanied them for another mile. Yang Xiao said: “Buhui, you go back and look after Yin sixth uncle carefully.” Yang Buhui responded: “Yes.” Her eyes darted towards Wuji,

suddenly she blushed and said in a tiny voice: "Elder brother Wuji, I have a few words to say with you." Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude the 3 people chuckled: "You two have been friends since childhood, certainly there're some personal affairs to speak to each other." They then sped up their footsteps and ran away for a far distance. Yang Buhui said: "Elder brother Wuji, come here." She pulled his arm to come to and sit down a big rock next to the mountain side. Zhang Wuji was secretly confused: "She and I have been acquainted since childhood, the friendship between us is not ordinary, this time we met again after a long separation, yet since then she have treated me coolly and stand-offishly. What does she have to talk to me now?" He only saw that although Yang Buhui had not begun to speak her face had reddened already, she bowed her head in silence, only after quite a long time did she say: "Elder brother Wuji, when my Mom was at the brink of death, she asked you to look after me, didn't she?" Zhang Wuji said: "Yes." Yang Buhui said: "You crossed tens of thousands of miles, accompanying me from the bank of the Huaihe river to the Western region and delivered me to my Dad's hands. On the way, you had to risk you life many times and suffer so many hardships. This great graciousness cannot be repaid by merely saying thanks, that kindness of you I've only put it deeply in my heart and from before up to now I've not raised anything about it at all." Zhang Wuji said: "Never mind. What good does that have to be raised? If I had not accompanied you to the Western region, I myself wouldn't have had those lucky encounters and if that's the case I'm afraid that at this moment I would have been dead due to the dispersion of the Xuan Ming poison already." Yang Buhui said: "No, no! You're humane, heroic and generous so every adverse thing that you met can change into good luck. Elder brother Wuji, I've been motherless since childhood, although my Dad love me there're some matters which I don't dare to talk to him about. You're the head of our cult, but in my heart, I still only

consider you as my older full brother. That day at the Brightness Peak, when I suddenly see you return, I was so happy that I was speechless. I felt embarrassed to say it out in front of you, are you angry with me?" Zhang Wuji replied: "No! Certainly no."

Zhang Wuji saw her back vanish behind a mountain side. His mind was puzzled, he didn't know how to deal with this matter. After standing in trance there for a while, he ran after the trio including Wei Yixiao. Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude found that there seemed to be traces of tears in the corners of his eyes, they couldn't help glancing at Yang Xiao and smiling faintly, meaning: "Congratulations! Left Herald Yang will soon become the father-in-law of Cult Leader." After the four people had descended the Wudang mountain, Yang Xiao said: "This Miss Zhao doesn't travel alone, there are many henchmen around her so it'll not be hard to find her whereabouts. Let us separate to give chases in the four directions East, West, South and North. At tomorrow's midday we will be gathering together in Gu Cheng town. What about your venerable opinion, Cult Leader?" Zhang Wuji said: "Very good, let's do just so. I'll go westward." Gu Cheng town was to the East of the Wudang mountain, going westward to search meant he'd have to go farther than the others would for a stretch of road. He went on: "The martial arts of the Xuan Ming Two Elders are extremely fierce, seeing them, you three should evade them if it 's possible and should not single-handedly engage in any fight with them." The trio accepted the commands. They immediately bowed and made their farewells to Zhang Wuji then left toward three different directions East, South and North to investigate. In the West, there were only mountain roads, Zhang Wuji applied his qing-gong (lightness skill) and ran fast. In more than two hours, he arrived in Shi Yan town. He stopped at a restaurant in the town to order a bowl of noodles. He asked the waiter whether there had been any

golden-brocade-covered palankeen going past here. The waiter replied: "Yes, there was! There were also three seriously injured people. They lied on three hammocks which were carried along with the palankeen. They have just gone toward Huang Long town in the West for less than an hour." Zhang Wuji was very pleased, he thought that the pace of these people was not fast, so in order to avoid revealing his own track, waiting until the evening to pursue them would not be late. He then found a quiet place to take a sleep and waited till the first watch of the night (1 a.m.) before going to Huang Long town.

Zhang Wuji reached the town when it was still earlier than the second watch (2 a.m.) of the night. He hid behind a corner of a wall and saw that the street was very quiet without any sound of anyone. But in a big hotel, there was still a dazzling brightness of lamps and torches. He jumped onto a nearby roof, after several leaps he arrived at the roof of a small house next to the hotel. Looking around, he saw a big cloth tent on a riverside ground. There were many people coming and going at the front and the back of the tent. Obviously it was guarded with strict security precautions. Zhang Wuji thought: "Is it possible that Miss Zhao is in that cloth tent? Her facial expression and her way of speaking are not different from those of the Han Chinese, but the way she acts is overbearing and extravagant to a certain extent." At that time, the Yuan dynasty had been dominating the Central Plain for a long time, Han tyrannical gentries also tried to immitate the prevailing customs of the Mongolian for honour so this was not strange. While he was pondering on how to approach the tent, unexpectedly, he heard some groans spreading from window of the hotel. He then changed his mind, jumped off the roof, tiptoed to a place under the window and looked inside the room. He only saw that there were three people lying on three beds, among them, there were two whose faces he couldn't see. The man

lying near the window was exactly A'San, he was moaning softly, his injuries were clearly in extreme agony, his two arms and two legs all were bound up with white plain cloth. Suddenly an idea flashed upon him, he thought: "His four limbs were all broken, he must have used the efficacious medicine of his own school, the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, to treat the injuries. If I don't snatch it right now, so when?" He broke open the window and jumped into the room. A man standing in the room called out in alarm and sent out a fist. Zhang Wuji used his left hand to grab that man's fist, his right hand extended and hit on the man's numb acupoint. He turned around and saw that the two people who were lying there were precisely A'Er and Eight-Armed Swordsman Fang Dongbai. The man whose acupoint had just been sealed wore a black gown, he was still holding two gold needles in his hands. Perhaps he had been acupunctureing the three injured to cut off the pain for them. On the table, was putting a black bottle, there were several pieces of mugwort next to the bottle. Zhang Wuji took up the bottle, pulled out its lid to smell, he only felt a rush of a hot and pungent odour to his nose. A'San called out: "Help! There's a medicine robber..." (NOTE: in the Chinese text: ???,??... - sorry, I don't know how to translate it well) Zhang Wuji moved his finger fast as wind to successively seal the mute acupoints of the 3 men. He ripped open the bandage on A'San's arm. Expectedly, he saw the arm was covered by a thin black layer of medicinal ointment. For fear that Zhao Min was devilish cunning and had intentionally put fake medicine in the bottle to entice him to come here by himself, he began to scrape the ointment of the sores of A'San and the bald A'Er onto the bandage. He thought that even if in the bottle was fake medicine, the paste taken from their sores couldn't be false. Hearing the sounds, the outside guards kicked the door open wide and fled into. Zhang Wuji didn't need to look at them, he gave each one a kick sending them out. In a short moment, the people in the

hotel had begun to scream noisily and gotten into a chaotic crowd. He had kicked six people out one after another but he had only scraped more than a half of the ointment on A'San's and the bald A'Er's sores. Thinking that it would possibly not be very wonderful if he tarried here more so that the Xuan Ming Two Elders would enter, he put the bottle and the bandage in his bosom then lifted the physician and threw him out of the window.

Only a big noise of crushing resounded, that physician was hit by a hard palm and felt on the ground. This was what Zhang Wuji expected, there were definitely elite fighters ambushing outside the window. Zhang Wuji took advantage of that moment to rush out. White light flashed in the dark when two sharp weapons thrust toward him. To the Great Universal Shifting Technique this was just a minor matter to deal with, applying the technique, he used his left hand to pull and his right hand to direct (NOTE: this sentence is ???????????? in the Chinese text, but I don't know how to translate it into English literally and smoothly, I'm so sorry), the sword on the left then stabbed at the man on the right and the spear on the right hit the man on the left. In chaotic sounds he had already run away. On the way back, Zhang Wuji felt very joyful thinking that even though this time he had not found out Zhao Min's origin yet, he had obtained the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, which was even much better. At this moment it was too late to go to Gu Cheng to meet the group of Yang Xiao, he returned to the Wudang mountain and ordered the Red Water Flag to send members to call them back. Hearing the news that Zhang Wuji had gotten the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, Zhang Sanfeng and the others all were very glad. Zhang Wuji examined the medicine he had scraped from the sores on A'San's body carefully, he also took out a bit of the ointment in the bottle to make a more detailed compare and confirmed that they were the same. The black bottle was

carved out of a big piece of jade. It was as black as lacquer, caused a feeling of warmth when touching and looked very antique. Even the bottle alone was an extremely precious treasure. No longer having a doubt, he ordered his subordinates to carry Yin Liting to Yu Daiyan's room, placing the two beds in parallel. Yang Buhui followed into the room. She didn't dare to look directly at Zhang Wuji's eyes, but her face showed a radiance and there was an extreme appreciation in her heart. Obviously, Zhang Wuji accompanying her to the Western region and drinking the cup of poisoned wine at He Taichong's residence on behalf of her, such much of kindness still couldn't compare to him urgently curing Yin Liting's injury.

Zhang Wuji said: "Third uncle, your former injury healed up, to treat you now, nephew will have to break off the bones of your arms and your legs then connect them back. I hope you'll try to bear this temporary pain." Yu Daiyan did not believe that he himself having been disabled for more than twenty years could be fully restored, but he thought even if the treatment failed, the worst of it would not be worse than the present condition, for the past twenty years he had not been caring for anything already anyway. He only thought: "Wuji has exerted himself to the utmost wholeheartedly wanting to make up for the faults of his parents, otherwise he'll never be able to put his mind at rest. There's nothing whatsoever considerable about my transitory pain." He then did not ask about anything, only smiled faintly, said: "No problem, you can do anything at your convenience." Zhang Wuji asked Yang Buhui to go out, took off all the clothes of Yu Daiyan, located all the breaks in his bones carefully, afterwards he sealed his comatose acupoint. He transferred his energy to his ten fingers, 'crack crack crack', the snaps resounded continuously, all the breaks which healed up in Yu Daiyan's bones were broken again. Although Yu Daiyan's acupoint had been sealed, the pain was still so great that it

awoke him up. Zhang Wuji's technique was fast as wind, irrespective of whether the bones were big or small, he broke them all, Then he immediately rejoined all the breaks accurately, applied the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste to the sores, bound them up, put them in wooden splints before giving acupuncture to relieve the pain.

To treat Yin Liting was much easier than to treat Yu Daiyan since when they had been in the Western region, Zhang Wuji had set all the broken bones of Yin Liting in place so at this time he only needed to apply the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste. After treating Yin Liting, he sent the very General Vice Heralds of the Five Element Flags to guard by turns in case the enemy would come to harass. In the afternoon of the same day, after finishing his lunch, Zhang Wuji took a quick nap in the cloud room to regain his strength after a weary night of scurrying. When he was in a dream, suddenly he heard light foot-steps approaching the entrance and woke up immediately. Xiao Zhao, who was guarding outside, asked in a low voice: "What's the matter? Cult Leader is resting." Yan Yuan, the General Flag Herald of the Thick Earth Flag, said under his breath: "Sixth Hero Yin has been in such pain that he has fainted three times, does Cult Leader..." Zhang Wuji did not wait till Yan Yuan finished the sentence, he stood up like a spring, rushed out of the room and accelerated his pace to Yu Daiyan's room. When he arrived, he only saw Yin Liting's 2 eyes have rolled upward, leaving only the whites, he had lost his unconsciousness already, Yang Buhui was so scared that her eyes filled with tears, she did not know what to do. Lying next to Yin Liting was Yu Daiyan, he was clenching his teeth with screeching noises. Obviously he was trying to endure the pain, only because his temper was unyielding that he did not let out any groan. Seeing that scene, Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised, he massaged several times on the acupoints Cheng Qi, Tai Yang, Tan Zhong... of Yin Liting,

resuscitating him, then asked Yu Daiyan: "Third uncle, the breaks in your bones are very painful, aren't they?" Yu Daiyan replied: "The breaks are painful, that's just plain, but even the six internal organs and the five innards are itchy unbearably... as if, as if there're tens of thousands of insects eating and digging higgledy-piggledy. Zhang Wuji could not be more worried, on hearing what Yu Daiyan had just said, he knew clearly that this was a condition of being poisoned seriously. He hastily asked Yin Liting: "How do you feel, sixth younger uncle?" Yin Liting raved: "Red, purple, blue, green, yellow, white, azure,... How beautiful, so many little balls hovering and moving back and forth... Really attractive... You see, you see..."

Zhang Wuji uttered a loud cry: "Ayo" and nearly passed out on the spot. He instantly thought of a passage in the Book of Poisons written by Wang Nangu that said: "The Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste, made by mixing up seven kinds of poisonous flower and seven kinds of poisonous insect. The victim of this poison first feels itchy in the internal organs as if he is being gnawed internally by seven kinds of insect, then he sees seven colors appearing in front of him which looks wonderful and fanciful as if there are seven kinds of flower flying flickeringly. The Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste is composed of seven kinds of insect and seven kinds of flower so its components vary with individuals and regions. It has a maximum of forty nine different ways of combination each of which has sixty three variants. Only the person who makes up the poison can know how to detoxify." Cold sweat streamed down from Zhang Wuji's forehead, he knew that he himself had fallen into Zhao Min's devilish trap. Not only had she intentionally put the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste in the black jade bottle but she had also applied this violent poison on the bodies of A'San and the bald A'Er regardless these two elite fighters' lives essentially aiming to lure him into her trap. Such a fiendish mind was

really unimaginable. He utterly repented and hastily untied all the splints and bandages on the bodies of Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting then used white liquor to clean the poisonous paste from their limbs. Yang Buhui saw his serious expression, she knew this important business had not been successful so she was no longer shy of anything and helped Zhang Wuji to clean Yin Liting's four limbs with liquor. However, the black had soaked through the skin, it could not be washed off no matter how hard they tried. Just like the case of lacquerers whose hands were dyed with colors, cleaning the black was not an overnight affair.

Zhang Wuji did not dare to use medicine rashly, he only picked out several kinds of pain-killer and tranquillizer for them to take. He walked to the outside room, feeling both alarmed and ashamed. His fortitude was exhausted and his knees could not help becoming weak. Suddenly he dropped down, bent on the floor of the palace and burst out crying. Yang Buhui was frightened, she could only call out: "Wuji ge-ge, Wuji ge-ge!" Zhang Wuji sobbed: "I myself killed third uncle and sixth younger uncle already." He only thought in his mind: "This Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste has at least one hundred ways of combination, who knows what seven kinds of insect and flower that she used are? To detoxicate this fierce poison is merely to use the principle of neutralizing poison by poison, so even if only one kind of poisonous insect or flower is guessed wrong and I use that remedy carelessly, third uncle and six younger uncle will die forthwith." At that moment, all of a sudden, he fully understood his father's thoughts when he had ended his life, that was once a serious mistake was unable to be saved, there would really be no way except committing suicide. Zhang Wuji sluggishly stood up. Yang Buhui asked: "Is there really no cure for this poison? Even reluctantly trying one time is also impossible?" Zhang Wuji shook his head. Yang Buhui said: "Alright." She looked calm and no longer showed

any sign of panic.

Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred up, he recalled the sentence which she had said before: "If his injury was too serious to be cured, I wouldn't be able to live too." He thought: "This time I kill not only 2 people but actually 3." When Zhang Wuji was at a loss, suddenly Wu Jingcao walked to the outside of the door and reported to him: "Cult Leader, that Miss Zhao is seeking a meet at the outside of the gate." Just on hearing that, Zhang Wuji felt so indignant that he could not restrain himself, he shouted out: "I'm just about to look for her." He drew out the long sword from Yang Buhui's waist, hold it in his hand then went out in big strides. Xiao Zhao took down the pearl hairpin on her hair, hand it to Zhang Wuji, said: "Mister, you give it back to Miss Zhao please." Zhang Wuji cast his eyes upon her, thought: "You really know my intention. The feud between me and that girl surnamed Zhao is deep as the ocean, I cannot keep anything of her." Holding the sword in one hand and the pearl hairpin in the other he walked out of the gate, only saw Zhao Min standing there alone, she was smiling. It was sundown by then, the Sun obliquely projected the blood-red rays of light on her cheeks, she looked incomparably beautiful. The Xuanming Two Elders stood behind her from more than ten zhang (33.33m), they were holding three excellent horses in their hands and staring into space.

Zhang Wuji moved his body, in a flash he was right in front of Zhao Min. He extended his left hand and grabbed both Zhao Min's wrists, his right hand pointed the tip of the sword at her chest. He shouted at her: "Give up the antidote, quick!" Zhao Min smiled: "You've bullied me once before, this time you also want to bully me again, don't you? I come here to inquire after you, yet you bear a glowering face, how can this be a proper way of welcoming guest?" Zhang Wuji said: "I need the antidote, if you don't hand it over, I... I'll

not want to live anymore, you don't think you'll be able to live as well." Zhao Min's cheeks slightly reddened, she spit in a soft voice and said: "Bah! How nice? You dying is your own business, how come it has anything to do with me that you want me do die together with you?" Zhang Wuji raised his voice: "Who's joking with you, huh? Hand over the antidote or else this day will be the day you and I die together." At that time both the hands of Zhao Min were being seized tightly by him, she felt he was tremulously all of a shake showing an extremely excited mood, she also felt a hard object in his hand, so she asked: "What are you holding in your hand?" Zhang Wuji said: "Your pearl hairpin. I give it back to you." He lifted his left hand to fix the hairpin onto her hair then immediately got hold of her two wrists again. His technique was fast as lightning performing the release and the grasp nearly at same time. Zhao Min said: "I gave it to you, why don't you want it?" Zhang Wuji said fretfully: "You've always played me up and caused me good miseries, I don't want to receive anything from you." Zhao Min said: "You don't wanna receive anything from me? Are you serious or just kidding? So why did you ask me to hand over the antidote as soon as you began to speak?" Previously, every time Zhang Wuji had argued with her, he had always gotten disadvantaged, this time he got stuck too. Thinking of Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting going to die before long, he felt deep grief in his heart and his eyes could not refrain from turning reddish, he almost let his tears roll down. No longer being able to bear up anymore, Zhang Wuji was about to implore her for the antidote but remembering that Zhao Min was such malignant, he did not want to show his feebleness in front of her.

At this time, Yang Xiao and others had known the news, they walked out of the gate together and saw that Zhao Min had been caught by Wuji and the Xuanming Two Elders were standing from a long distance as if they did not care for or

did not fear anything. Everybody then stood aside and observed calmly.

Zhao Min smiled and said: "You're the Leader of the Ming cult, your martial arts can shake the world, yet just encountering a bit of difficulty you wept 'wah wah wah' noisily like a child already. You just cried a short moment ago, right? That's just really shameful. Let me tell you. You were hit two stances of the Xuanming Divine Palm by the the Xuanming Two Elders so I come here to ask after your injury. But to my unexpected, just barely seeing my face, you already made a fuss about nothing but die and live stuff, why? Let go of me will you?" Zhang Wuji thought even if she wanted to take the opportunity to get away she would not be able to do so since as soon as her feet moved, he would immediately grab hold of her, so he set her hands free. Zhao Min raised one hand to adjust the pearl hairpin on her hair, she smiled and said: "You seem not to be injured at all, don't you?" Zhang Wuji said coldly: "Just the Xuanming Divine Palm alone not necessarily can injure me." Zhao Min said: "Then how about the Great Force Diamond Finger and the the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste?" These two sentences were like two big iron hammers striking hard on Zhang Wuji's chest. He said vexedly: "It's expectedly the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste." Zhao Min said in a stern voice: "Cult Leader Zhang, you want to get the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, I can give you, you want to get the antidote for the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste, I also can give you provided that you're willing to promise to meet my three matters, then I'll offer them up to you with pleasure. But if you use force to intimidate me, well, it's easy to kill me, but to obtain the antidote, that'll be hard and even harder in addition. And if you dare to torture me again, I'll only give you poison and fake medicine."

Zhang Wuji felt very jubilant and immediately showed

gladness in his expression, although his eyes were still being dewed with tears. He hastily said: "What three matters? Quick say, quick say." Zhao Min said with a smile: "Both crying and smiling at the same time, you're really shameless! I said to you earlier, I've not thought them out yet. When I think of them I'll let you know, as long as you promise me faithfully and don't break your words. I will not ask you to clutch the Moon in the sky, also not ask you to do the evil things which violate the chivalry ethics, not ask you to commit suicide as well, and of course not ask you to act as dogs or pigs either." Zhang Wuji thought: "On condition that those matters don't go against the chivalry ethics, no matter how hard they are I'll work myself to exhaustion to complete." He then said chivalrously: "Miss Zhao, if you kindly bestow the efficacious medicine so that I can cure my third uncle Yu and sixth younger uncle Yin, then no matter what you ask me to do, Zhang Wuji will never dare to refuse even if I'll have to jump into boiling water or walk on burning fire. Please yourself." Zhao Min stretched out one palm, said: "Good, let's applaud for the oath. I'll give you the antidote so that you can treat your third uncle and sixth younger uncle. Later on, if I ask you to do three things which don't offend the knightliness you will not be permitted to refuse and will have to try your best to fulfill them." Zhang Wuji said: "With respect, I obey your venerable words." He gently clashed palms with her three times. Zhao Min took down the hairpin from her head, said: "So now, do you want to accept my present?" In fear of her not giving the antidote, he did not dare to disobey her will and hastily received the pearl hairpin. Zhao Min said: "But I don't want you to pass it on to that pretty maidservant again." Zhang Wuji said: "Yes." Zhao Min took three steps backward, she smiled and said: "The antidote will be delivered to you immediately, Cult Leader Zhang, goodbye!" She brushed her sleeves, turned around and walked away. The Xuanming Two Elders then led the horses along. They helped her get on a horse to

leave first before following her. The clop-clop of hoofbeats resounded when the three horses descended the mountain.

When the trio including Zhao Min had just passed a mountain side, a man poked out from the canopy of a big tree on the left, he was Qian Er'bai of the Divine Arrow Eight Heroes and was holding an iron bow. He fixed an arrow on the bow and shouted: "With all due respect, my owner submits a letter to Cult Leader Zhang, please accept and read." Upon these words, a 'sou' sound was heard, the arrow had shot toward him. Zhang Wuji made a wave with his left hand to catch the arrow. He found that the arrow did not have the arrowhead and there was a letter tied to the end of it. Zhang Wuji untied the letter from the arrow to take a look, the envelope read 'Personally addressed to Cult Leader Zhang'. He opened the envelope and saw a flower-filigreed paper on which there were several lines written in the little standard script style (xiao kaishu - ???):

'The golden box has two compartments
one of which has contained the efficacious paste for long,
The pearl hairpin is hollow
which has the remedy for the poison inside
Those two things were offered to the gentleman long ago
why are you so exhausted and worried?
Though they are just tiny things
which are not worthy being taken into consideration
why did you give them to a maidservant?
why did you regard them just as dirt and dust?
They are not counted as my sincere wishes are they?'

(Foxs, edited by Eliza Bennet)

Zhang Wuji read this note three times; he was pleasantly surprised but also ashamed. Hastily he examined the pearl head ornament and tried to twist the pearls one by one. Finally he found one he could unscrew and remove

completely. The golden stem was hollow and inside it was a little white scroll. Zhang Wuji took out a golden needle from his pocket, the one he usually used for acupuncture, and fished the scroll out. The paper was very thin; on it the list of seven poisonous insects and seven poisonous flowers, plus the recipe of the antidote, were indeed written, everything was explained clearly one by one. Actually, Zhang Wuji only needed to know the seven insects and seven flowers, since he did not need other people's direction on how to detoxify it. He looked at the recipe and found it to be correct, so he knew Zhao Min was not trying to swindle him. Hastily he rushed to the inner courtyard and prepared the antidote. Sure enough, a little over two hours later Yu and Yin two people were in a much better condition, the itch inside their bodies stopped and the various colors they saw in their vision disappeared.

Zhang Wuji took out the golden case in which Zhao Min delivered the pearl head ornament. After examining it carefully he found the secret compartment on the box's wall, with black paste pressed in between. The paste smelled fragrant and cool. This time he did not dare to act recklessly, thereupon he caught a dog and broke its hind leg, then spread the paste on it. Early morning the next day that dog was running around without any sign of poisoning, and its broken leg was healed.

By the third day the poison inside Yu and Yin two people was completely eradicated; thereupon Zhang Wuji applied the 'hei yu duan xu gao' [black jade break connecting (or fracture healing) paste] on their four limbs. This time nothing strange happened. The 'hei yu duan xu gao' was marvelously effective; after about two months Yin Liting's hands could move freely. It looked like very soon not only he would be able to move his hands and feet, but also his martial art was not damaged too much. Too bad Yu Daiyan

had been disabled for too long, it would be difficult for him to fully recover. But looking at his condition right now, there was a great chance that within half a year he would be able to walk with crutches. He would still be handicapped, but he would be able to move around and not be crippled anymore.

Because Zhang Wuji was delayed on the Mount Wudang, he dispatched the Five-Element Flags to go down the mountain ahead of him. Upon their return they brought some rather disturbing news. Not a single one of the people from Emei, Huashan, Kongtong and Kunlun Sects who went to the Brightness Peak returned to their respective sect. The Jianghu world was shaken. Everybody said that the Devil Cult had annihilated all experts from the six major sects who went on the expedition to the western region, and then extinguished each sect separately one by one. The sudden-disappearing Shaolin monks had created an unprecedented wave in the Wulin world. Luckily each flag leader and his second-in-command carried the letter written by Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Sect; they also did not reveal their true identities, otherwise they would be torn to pieces by each sect they visited.

All flag leaders and his second-in-commands also reported that by that time in Jianghu world every sect, clan and society, as well as expedition companies, robbers, pirates, harbor gangs, and so on were on the highest level of alert since they were afraid the Ming Cult would launch a large scale attack.

A few days later Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang father and son had also returned to Wudang, reporting that the completion of the reorganizing effort of the Heavenly Eagle Flag; it is now part of the Ming Cult. They also reported that the warriors of the southeast raised their arms to fight the Yuan invaders; the world was in great tumult. In the meantime the Yuan army was still too strong, furthermore

each rebellion was staged individually, without any contact with each other; therefore, they were easily crushed.

That same evening Zhang Sanfeng held a vegetarian banquet at the rear hall in honor of Yin Tianzheng father and son. During the banquet Yin Tianzheng narrated the cause of each defeat, and how in each insurrection the Ming Cult and the Heavenly Eagle Sect disciples always took part in it, and that many of them were captured or even killed by the Yuan soldiers; making an ultimate sacrifice in the process.

As the group of warriors listened to his narration, they all sighed in grief and anger. Yang Xiao said, "The people's suffering is already very deep. Their hearts are changed; they want to drive the Tartar and capture back our river and mountain ['he shan' – country or land]. When Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, day and night it was his sole concern. It's a pity that our Cult used to handle matters differently that for the last hundred of years we are always involved in feud against various Wulin sects of the Central Plains; making it difficult to join hands to fight the enemy. With the Heaven's blessing we now have Zhang Jiaozhu to handle the Cult's affairs, gradually solving our enmity with each sect. The time is ripe to work together and drive out the invaders."

"Yang Zuoshi," Zhou Dian said, "What you said was not wrong, but it was a pile of rubbish, it was like a fart."

Yang Xiao was not angry, "Then I am waiting for Zhou Xiong's advice," he said.

Zhou Dian replied, "The Jianghu people all say that our Cult has killed the experts of six major sects. Once they heard the word 'Ming Cult' their hatred is going deep into their bones and marrows. What do you mean by 'working together and drive out the invaders'? It was pleasant to the ears, but

how do we do it?"

"It's true that we have a bad name," Yang Xiao said, "But the truth will always be revealed in the end; moreover, we now have Zhang Zhenren [lit. true/real person – a respectable term to address a Taoist Priest] as our witness."

Zhou Dian laughed, "Supposing that it was really us who killed Song Yuanqiao, Old Nun Mie Jue, He Taichong and the others, how would Zhang Zhenren know that he was not being deceived?"

Tieguan Daoren [Iron Hat Taoist Priest] reprimanded him harshly, "Zhou Dian, don't talk nonsense in front of Zhang Zhenren and Jiaozhu!"

Zhou Dian stuck out his tongue but did not reply. Peng Yingyu said, "What Zhou Xiong said was not without reason. According to pinseng's [lit. impoverished monk – he was referring to himself] opinion, we should hold a general assembly of the Ming Cult's leaders, where we will make known Zhang Jiaozhu's intention to repair our relation with the Wulin world's various sects. At the same time, more people means broader horizon; we can discuss these matters and investigate Song Daxia [great hero Song], Mie Jue Shitai and the others' whereabouts during the assembly."

"If you want to find Song Daxia and the others' whereabouts; that is very easy. I might say as easy as blowing off the dust on top of this table," Zhou Dian said.

They were all surprised, "How?" they asked, "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

With a smug expression on his face, Zhou Dian drank a cup of wine and said, "All we need is Jiaozhu to go and ask that Miss Zhao. I am 90% sure that we will understand

everything. I say if those people are not killed by Miss Zhao, then they must be captured by her.”

For the last two months, Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyi, Shuo Bude and the others had separately gone down the mountain trying to find out Zhao Min’s origin and to track her trail; but since her appearance in front of Wudang and she shook hands with Zhang Wuji to seal their agreement, this person had disappeared without any trace. Even her many subordinates all had vanished without leaving the least bit of trace. They all speculated that she was related to the imperial government, but other than that they did not have any clue as where to seek her. This time hearing Zhou Dian speak they said, “Now you are talking rubbish! If we found that girl surnamed Zhao, wouldn’t we ask her ourselves?”

Zhou Dian said with a smile, “You certainly can’t find her; but Jiaozhu does not have to seek her to find her. Jiaozhu still owes her three things; do you think that fierce Miss will let him go so easily? Hey, hey! This girl is beautiful, but each time I think about her, all the hair on my body stands on its end; she causes me to shiver.”

Everybody could not help but smile, yet they understood the truth in what he said. Zhang Wuji sighed and said, “I only hope she would give me her three difficult problems quickly then I will do my best to do them and bring this matter to completion. Otherwise my thoughts will be in suspense all day long; not knowing what kind of strange trick she is performing. Anyway, about Peng Dashi’s [reverend, lit. grand master] suggestion earlier; our Cult will hold a general assembly of the leaders. This is quite feasible. What do all of you think?”

“It is,” they replied, “But it is better not on Mount Wudang.”

“Jiaozhu,” Yang Xiao said, “Where do you think is the best place?”

Zhang Wuji hesitated a moment before saying, “Being a humble Cult Leader today I always remember our own Cult’s two people’s benevolence. One is the Yi-xian [lit. medicine/medical immortal – Divine Doctor] of Butterfly Valley, Mr. Hu Qingniu; that Senior died under the Golden Flower Granny’s hand. The other is Chang Yuchun Dage [big brother]; I don’t know his whereabouts nowadays. I think, let’s hold our Cult’s general assembly on the Butterfly Valley in Huaibei.”

Zhou Dian clapped his hands and said, “Very good, very good! I bickered constantly with this ‘jian si bu jiu’ [seeing death without helping – previous translator used ‘rather see death than help’] in the past, but actually he was not a bad person, just a little bit eccentric. He employed different methods from Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang], but achieved equally wonderful results. He saw someone in danger and did nothing, in the end he died without anybody helping him; it was his retribution. I, Zhou Dian, want to go to his grave and bow to honor him.”

The rest of the group did not have any objection, they agreed upon the Midautumn Festival [‘zhong qiu’] in the eighth month, which was still a little over three months away; all leaders of the Ming Cult would hold their general assembly on the Butterfly Valley in Huaibei, the former residence of Hu Qingniu.

Early morning the next day all the Five-Element Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag went down Mount Wudang to convey their Cult Leader’s order: All cult leaders, from ‘xiang zhu’ [Translator note: I am not sure about this; I think this is

a supervisory position name within the Cult] and above to leave the business of the Cult to their assistants, and to be at the Huaibei's Butterfly Valley before the eighth month's Mid-autumn Festival, to pay their respect to the new Cult Leader.

By that time the Mid-autumn Festival was still some days away, and since Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting had not fully recovered from their injuries, Zhang Wuji was afraid their illness would recur and thus his efforts would be in vain; therefore, he decided to stay on Mount Wudang to look after Yu and Yin two people, while at the same time he leisurely asked Zhang Sanfeng to teach him more about Taiji Fist and Sword techniques. Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, Shuo Bude and the others went down the mountain once again trying to track Zhao Min's whereabouts. Yang Xiao received the Cult Leader's order to stay at Wudang, but because of Ji Xiaofu's affair, he felt uncomfortable to meet Yin Liting; hence he stayed cooped up in his room reading books and did not go out even for a single step from his door unless it was important to do so.

And so two months have passed. About the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm] one particular day Zhang Wuji visited Yang Xiao in his room; he wanted to consult Yang Xiao on the Butterfly Valley congress and to ask him about important matters surrounding their Cult. He was still young and lacking experience, suddenly thrown into the deep end of the pool; he oftentimes felt inadequate to bear this heavy responsibility. He was afraid he might do wrong an important matter and cause harm; while Yang Xiao had a deep knowledge of their Cult's affair. For that reason Zhang Wuji wanted Yang Xiao to be nearby so he could consult him anytime.

Two people discussed the congress at length. Zhang Wuji

casually took a book lying on top of Yang Xiao's table. On the cover these seven characters were written 'Ming Jiao Liu Chuan Zhong Tu Ji' [A record on the spread of Ming Cult to the Central Earth]; underneath, in smaller characters, 'Di Zi Guang Ming Zuo Shi Yang Xiao Gong Zhuan' [respectfully compiled by the Brightness disciple, Left Emissary Yang Xiao]. Zhang Wuji said, "Yang Zuoshi, you are skilled in both pen and sword ['wen wu quan cai'], truly you are our Cult's pillar."

"Many thanks for Jiaozhu's compliment," Yang Xiao said.

Zhang Wuji opened the book and saw in neat little characters an extensive documentation of everything about the Cult. The Ming Cult originated from Persia; it was originally called 'Mo Ni Jiao' [Manichaeism]. It entered the Central Earth during the first Yan Zai year of Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty, when a Persian man presented the Ming Cult's 'san zong jing' [three-purpose scripture] to the court; since then the Chinese people started to practice this teaching. In the third year of Tang's master calendar, on the twenty ninth day of the sixth month the first Ming Cult temple was built in Luoyang, Chang'an, with the name of 'Da Yun Guang Ming Si' [Great Cloud Brightness Temple]. Later on, these kinds of temples were built in Taiyuan, Jingzhou, Yangzhou, Hongzhou, Yuezhou, and other strategic small cities. Toward the third Hui Chang year the imperial government issued an order to kill the Ming Cult disciples; at that time the Ming Cult influence was greatly diminished. Since then the Ming Cult became an underground religion, oppressed by subsequent dynasties. In order for the Ming Cult to survive, it had to resort to sly and secret behavior, that in the end the character 'mo' of the 'Mo Ni Jiao' was changed to 'mo' [devil]; hence the people started calling it the Devil Cult.

Reading to this part Zhang Wuji heaved a long sigh and said, "Yang Zuoshi, our Cult's original teaching was to shun evil and do good deeds, no different than Buddhism or Taoism. Why is it since the Tang Dynasty we have been the target of oppression even to the point of atrocious slaughters?"

Yang Xiao replied, "Although Buddhism aim for the restoration of human kind, once a monk leaves home he empties himself and doesn't pay any more attention toward worldly matters. Taoism is the same. Our Cult moves among the common people and peasants; if we see someone in suffering or deep poverty, regardless of who it is, our people will strive to help. The government officials always bully common people; when did you ever see they didn't? Where did you ever see they didn't? As soon as we know someone received unjust treatment from an officer, our Cult is bound to clash with that officer."

Zhang Wuji nodded his head, "Only when the royal government authorities stop bullying common people, local tyrant landlords do not dare to run amuck, when that time comes, our Cult will enjoy true prosperity," he said.

Yang Xiao slapped the table and with a loud voice said, "What Jiaozhu said was the key point of our Cult's purpose."

"Yang Zuoshi," Zhang Wuji asked, "Do you think that day will come?"

Yang Xiao was silent for half a day before answering, "I do hope that day will come. During the Song Dynasty, Fang La, our own Fang Jiaozhu, rose up to tell the government authorities not to bully the common people." He opened the book and pointed the record about Ming Cult's Cult Leader Fang La staging an earth-shaking rebellion on east Zhejiang.

As Zhang Wuji read that part, he lifted his eyes to gaze towards the distance. Closing the book he said, "A real man should be as strong as he was. Although Fang Jiaozhu sacrificed his life, we can say that in the end he had rendered a massive contribution to our cause." Two people were thinking of the same thing and their blood was boiling.

Yang Xiao continued, "Although our Cult is oppressed for the last several dynasties, we actually are still standing strong. During the fourth Shaoxing year of the Song Dynasty there was an officer by the name of Wang Juzheng who presented a report about our Cult to the Emperor. Jiaozhu, you can take a look at it." While saying that he turned the page containing Wang Juzheng's report.

Zhang Wuji read the report as follows: 'In two of Zhejiang prefectures there is a custom of worshipping the devil and eating only vegetables.' Before Fang La the ban against this custom was still lenient and it was not as widely spread. After Fang La, the ban was stricter, but the devil worshipping became more rampant ... Subordinate heard that this is how they operate: there are one or two crafty devil worshipper leaders in every town and village, these have the record of names of the villagers who pledge to join the devil society. All of the devil worshippers do not eat meat. If one of their members is in difficulty, their comrades would do all they can to help. Basically by not eating meat they live a frugal and simple life. By helping each other in the same society they promote camaraderie, which, in the end, also support their frugal and simple way of living ...'

Reading to this point Zhang Wuji said, "Although that Wang Juzheng was hostile toward our Cult, he was aware that our people live a frugal and simple life, and we love and help each other." He continued reading, '... Subordinate believes

the previous Emperor also admonished the people to live a simple life and to love and help each other. Living a frugal and simple life is an honorable way of life since the ancient times. It's a pity that today's government leaders cannot be good example for the people, so that the Devil Leaders are able to entice them into joining their society and blindly follow their teaching. Common people are simple and ignorant; by following the Devil's teaching and live the Devil's way, living a simple and frugal life, they confirm the Devil Leaders' words as trustworthy sayings and do not made the slightest effort to challenge them. Therefore, the stricter the ban, the more they expand'

Zhang Wuji stopped reading, turning his head to Yang Xiao he said, "Yang Zuoshi, 'the stricter the ban, the more they expand'; this is exactly the proof that our Cult is deeply loved by the people. May I borrow this book, so I can learn more about our Cult's previous saints' outstanding achievements and their wishes?"

"I was about to ask Jiaozhu to give me your opinion," Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji took the book and said, "Yu Sanbo's [third martial (older) uncle] and Yin Liushu's [sixth martial (younger) uncle] conditions have improved tremendously; we are leaving for the Butterfly Valley tomorrow. I have another matter I'd like to discuss with Yang Zuoshi; it is about Buhui Meizi [sister/beloved]."

Yang Xiao thought Zhang Wuji was about to propose, so he was overjoyed. "Buhui owes her life to Jiaozhu; we, father and daughter, would love to pay that debt of gratitude back as soon as we can. Jiaozhu only need to say it and we will certainly comply." Thereupon Zhang Wuji recounted the details of what Yang Buhui had told him that day to Yang

Xiao.

As Yang Xiao heard this, he was stunned and was at a loss for words. Only after a long time did he finally open his mouth, "That my daughter is loved by Yin Liuxia [Sixth Hero Yin], it is truly a fortunate matter. But their age difference is huge, plus they come from different generations, this ... this ..." After saying the word 'this' twice, he did not know how to continue.

Zhang Wuji said, "Yin Liushu is not even forty years of age yet; he is still in the prime of his life. It's true that Buhui Meizi calls him 'Shushu' [(younger) uncle], but they don't have actual blood relationship or even martial relationship. Those two are perfectly suited to each other. If this marriage arrangement can be consummated, then the past animosity can be dissolved; won't that be great?"

Yang Xiao was a very open-minded person. Because of Ji Xiaofu's affair, he felt ashamed each time he saw Yin Liting. He silently pondered the fact that since Buhui was already in love then if the marriage could be consummated, it would not only redeem his own past transgression, but it would also strengthen the alliance between the Ming Cult and the Wudang Sect. Thereupon he cupped his fists and said, "That Jiaozhu is willing to lend a hand in the successful conclusion of this matter shows your loving concern to us. Subordinate would like to express my gratitude in advance."

That very evening Zhang Wuji announced the good news. The group of warriors immediately offered their heartiest congratulations to Yin Liting. Yang Buhui was shy; she did not dare to come out from her room. At first Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan were quite surprised to hear this, but later on they were happy for Yin Liting.

When asked about the wedding date, Yin Liting replied, “By the time Da Shige [first martial brother] and the others are back and everybody is here, it won’t be too late to talk about the wedding.”

The next day Zhang Wuji, along with Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang, Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, Xiao Zhao and the others, bid their farewells to Zhang Sanfeng and his disciples; they were leaving for Huaibei. Yang Buhui stayed behind on Mount Wudang to take care of Yin Liting. At that time the rule against men and women relationship was very strict, but they were Wulin people, so they did not adhere to this rule too strictly.

The Ming Cult people took their journey from dawn to dusk, heading towards northeast. Along the way they saw barren rice fields and the people had hunger written all over their faces. The coastal regions are usually rich and populous areas, but at that time the fields were dry and everywhere people died of starvation. The suffering of the common people had reached its peak. Seeing this disaster the Ming Cult people heaved a heavy sigh. They were aware that the brutal reign of the Mongolians on the Central Earth would not last too long. It was precisely the best opportunity for the warriors to take up their arms and fight the invaders.

One day they arrived at Jiepaiji; not too far from the Butterfly Valley. While they were walking suddenly they heard a deafening battle noise ahead; two opposing cavalries were engaged in a fierce battle. The Ming Cult people rushed their horses ahead. Passing through a forest they saw over a thousand Mongolian soldiers were attacking a fortified camp on a hill. Above the camp fluttered a big banner with a picture of red flame on it; it was the Ming Cult’s banner. The people defending the camp were smaller in number. It seemed like they were in a disadvantageous

situation, but they still fought unyieldingly.

The Mongolians' arrows came like rain. "Devil Cult rebels!" they shouted, "Quickly surrender!"

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "Shall we?"

"All right!" Zhang Wuji said, "Kill the leaders first."

Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang, Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, five people answered his call; breaking into the enemy formation. Long swords waved and two Mongolian 'bai fu zhang' [leader of 100 men unit] fell down their horses; followed by their 'qian fu zhang' [leader of 1000 men unit] fell under Yin Yewang's blade. The Yuan soldiers were thrown into confusion as soon as their leader fell down

The people defending the camp cheered as they saw help coming their way. The camp gate opened and a big burly man dressed in black came out with a lance in his hand. He charged into the Yuan soldiers and they were scattered away; nobody dared to block his lance. That big man swung his lance, quick as lightning, and a Yuan soldier was stabbed and fell from his horse. The soldiers around him cried out in alarm and fled to all directions.

Seeing this man's impressive, almost deity-like power, Yang Xiao and the others praised him highly, "Truly a heroic commander!"

Actually Zhang Wuji had seen that man's face clearly; he was none other than his big brother, Chang Yuchun, whom he missed dearly. Only the battle was raging wild, he did not have the opportunity to greet him. The Ming Cult people attacked left and right, killing about five, six hundreds Yuan soldiers. The rest of the enemy did not dare to prolong the

battle, they scattered around and fled the battlefield.

Chang Yuchun lifted his lance horizontally and laughed. "Which brothers come to lend help? Old Chang is deeply grateful," he called out.

"Chang Dage," Zhang Wuji called out, "I miss you very much." Leaping toward him he grabbed Chang Yuchun's hands tightly.

Chang Yuchun bowed in respect and said, "Brother Jiaozhu, I am your Dage [big brother], but I also am your subordinate. My joy is unspeakable."

It turned out that Chang Yuchun was an officer under the Gigantic Wood Flag. He had learned Zhang Wuji's taking over the Cult Leader position and the circumstances surrounding it from the Flag Leader Wen Cangsong. He recently led a group of Cult brethren to wait for Zhang Wuji. Unfortunately they were attacked by the Yuan army. Knowing his group was inferior in number, he originally was about to pretend defeat to lure the enemy into the camp, and then he would crush them. Unexpectedly Zhang Wuji and his entourage arrived and lent their assistance. Taking advantage of this favorable situation he went out of the camp and made some killing. His position in the Ming Cult was not high; therefore, he immediately paid his respects to Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others. The leaders knew he was their Cult Leader's sworn brother, so they did not dare to act condescendingly. They held out their hands to greet him and treated him with utmost respect. Chang Yuchun invited the leaders to enter the camp. He butchered some sheep and prepared a banquet for his guests. And then they talked about what happened after they were separated.

The Huainan and Huaibei area experienced drought for the past several years in a row; the common people's suffering was beyond description. Chang Yuchun did not expect to live; he gathered a band of brothers and they lived as robbers ['lu lin' – lit. green forest], plundering food, gold and silver and storing them in the stronghold. After accumulating enough, they distributed the goods to the poor people. Several times the Yuan army tried to attack, but they always failed.

They all spent the night inside the camp. The next day they, along with Chang Yuchun, went north. They thought since the Yuan soldiers were defeated, they would not dare to attack within these two, three months. Several days later they arrived at the Butterfly Valley. As the Ming Cult people who had arrived earlier heard their Cult Leader's arrival, they went out the valley to welcome him. In the meantime the Gigantic Wood Flag had built many thatched huts and wooden cabins as temporary residence of the leaders. Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, Shou Bude and the others had already arrived earlier; they reported their failure to find Miss Zhao's whereabouts.

After receiving the Ming Cult leaders, Zhang Wuji prepared some offerings and went to the graves of Hu Qingniu, husband and wife, and Ji Xiaofu. He recalled the day he left the valley, he was sorrowful, frightened and in a very difficult situation. Today he returned in glorious splendor as the Cult Leader of a powerful cult; it felt like a whole world apart.

Three days later it was the fifteenth of the eighth month. A tall altar had been built in the middle of the Butterfly Valley. A huge bonfire was built in front of the altar. Zhang Wuji climbed on top of the altar to announce their pledge to put away their previous enmity with various sects of the Central

Plains and their desire to drive the Yuan invaders out. He also issued some religious rules; reaffirming their pledge to do good and shun evil, and thus following the original Cult teaching.

The Cult members immediately showed their obedience by lighting up the incense and they swore their pledge that they would not dare to disobey their Cult Leader's decree. Under the bright sun the fire in front of the altar was blazing high, the fragrance of the incense spread everywhere, the Ming Cult flourished far beyond in the time past. Seeing this prosperous situation, some older members remembered how for the last dozen of years the Ming Cult was split up and their destruction was imminent, they could not help but break down in tears.

Later in the afternoon a Ming Cult subordinate came to report, "Flooding Water Flag disciples, Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da and the others seek an audience with Jiaozhu."

Zhang Wuji was delighted; he personally went out of the gate to meet them. Zhu Yuanzhang and Xu Da were accompanied by Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, Wu Liang and Wu Zhen. They stood respectfully outside the gate. As they saw Zhang Wuji come out, they bowed in respect and said, "Greetings to Jiaozhu!"

Zhang Wuji often remembered how Xu Da had saved his life; he was very happy to see these people, he immediately returned the salute. Taking Zhu Yuanzhang in his left hand and Xu Da in his right, he took them inside and invited them to sit down. After apologizing to each other they took their seats. By then Zhu Yuanzhang had already returned to secular life, he was no longer dressed as a Buddhist monk. He said, "As your subordinates received Jiaozhu's order, we hurried along to the Butterfly Valley. We should have been

arrived a few days earlier, but on the way we met a completely baffling matter that your subordinates had to investigate; hence we missed the general assembly. We ask for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

"I wonder what kind of baffling matter was that?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhu Yuanzhang said, "All of us were delighted when we received Jiaozhu's order on the first week of the sixth month; we brothers discussed what kind of gift we need to prepare to congratulate Jiaozhu. Huaibei is a poor place, there is nothing good in there; fortunately the assembly was still some times away, so we went to Shandong to try our luck. We were afraid the government authorities would recognize us; therefore, we disguised ourselves as mule cart drivers, your subordinate was the leader. One day we arrived at Guidefu in Henan, where were hired by some customers who wanted to go to Heze, Shandong. While we were traveling suddenly some people pursued us with blades and spears, very fierce and menacing. They chased away our customers and told us to drive other customers. Brother Hua wanted to deal with them right away, but Brother Xu signaled him with his eyes to look clearly into this matter before making any move first. Those people led us with our nine mule carts to a valley in the mountain. We saw there were already about a dozen other carts waiting, while on the ground sat some Buddhist monks."

"Buddhist monks?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"That's right," Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "Those monks hang their heads low, they looked so dejected. But among them there were some unusual looking people, some had their 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint] bulging out of their temples, some were tall and powerfully built. Brother Xu quietly told me

that those monks were all martial art experts. Those fierce people ordered the monks to ride on the carts and then they led us all to the north. Subordinate believed something was wrong, so I quietly told everybody to be on their guards and not to reveal our true identity. Along the way we paid full attention to what those fierce people were saying, but those people were very secretive; they did not say anything in our presence. Afterwards Brother Wu Liang gathered up his courage and eavesdropped outside their window in the middle of the night. He did that for four, five nights in a row before he finally found out that those monks were actually from the Shaolin Temple of Mount Song in Henan.”

“Ah!” Although Zhang Wuji had partly guessed it, he still could not restrain himself from exclaiming.

Zhu Yuanzhang continued, “Brother Wu Liang heard one of those fierce people say, ‘Master’s strategy is truly divine, worthy of other people’s utmost admiration. Shaolin, Wudang, and the rest of the six major sects are in our hand. Who had ever achieved such result since the ancient time?’ Another man said, ‘I am not surprised. One arrow two eagles [killing two birds with one stone], the Devil Cult leaders will be implicated by this matter.’ We seven people pretended going to the bathroom and quietly discussed this matter. We all agreed that since by coincidence this matter concerning our Cult fell into our hands, then we must investigate carefully and submit a report to Jiaozhu.”

“You have done the right thing,” Zhang Wuji commented.

“We continued going north,” Zhu Yuanzhang said, “All the while we maintained our disguises as simple men. Brother Tang He and Brother Deng Yu pretended to bicker over five coins of silver; they fought awkwardly, like people who do not know martial art at all. Those fierce people clapped their

hands and laughed, and afterwards they did not pay us any attention anymore. We called them 'lao ye' [lit. old master] this and 'lao ye' that, flattering them by all kinds of crap. At one time Brother Wu Zhen was thinking of drugging them, diverting their attention and then saving those Shaolin monks; but then we thought it over, we did not know anything about what was going on, these ominous people were well-trained in martial arts. We were afraid we might disturb the grass and scare the snake, and harming an important matter by alerting the enemy; therefore, all along we did not dare to make our move.

When we arrived at the Hejian prefecture we met with six other big carts, also full of prisoners. They dressed as common civilians. During the meal I overheard a Shaolin monk greeted one of the newcomers, 'Song Daxia [great hero], you are here!'"

Zhang Wuji leaped up and hastily asked, "Did he say 'Song Daxia'? What did he look like?"

Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "His body was slim-built, he looked about fifty, sixty years of age, wearing a three-branch long beard. His face looked simple yet elegant."

Zhang Wuji knew it was indeed Song Yuanqiao. He was pleasantly surprised and asked further what the rest of those people looked like. Turned out Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Mo Shenggu three people were also among those prisoners. "Are they injured? Are they shackled?" he asked.

"I did not see any shackle," Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "I also did not see any injury. They talked and ate just like any ordinary people, only they looked dispirited; also they walked swaying and staggering. As he was greeted by that Shaolin monk he only smiled bitterly but did not say

anything. The Shaolin monk was about to say something else, but one of the fierce people pulled him away. Thereafter our two groups were separated by about ten 'li's; we did not stop and eat together anymore; subordinate has never seen Song Daxia's group ever since. About the third day of the seventh month our group of Shaolin monks arrived at Dadou [lit. grand capital, present day Beijing]."

"Ah," Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "You went to Dadou, then they must have fallen into the treacherous hand of the royal government. And then what happened?"

Zhu Yuanzhang continued, "Those fierce people led us to take the Shaolin monks toward a big temple on the west side of the city. They also told us to spend the night in the temple."

"What temple was that?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"When we entered the temple, subordinate looked up at the sign above the gate, it was called Wan An Si [Temple of Ten-thousand Peace]," Zhu Yuanzhang answered, "But because of that one of the ominous people struck me with his horse whip. That night we brothers quietly discussed our situation. We believed these ominous people would kill us to shut our mouths up, so when the sky turned black we quietly escaped."

"It was very dangerous," Zhang Wuji said, "You were lucky those ominous people did not pursue you."

Tang He smiled and said, "Zhu Dage [Big Brother Zhu] has already anticipated that. Before leaving we captured seven mule cart drivers from the neighborhood and changed our clothes with theirs. Afterwards we killed them inside the temple. We mutilated their faces so that those ominous

people would not recognize them. We also killed the other mule cart drivers who came with us and we scattered money everywhere to make it look like two groups of people fought over money and killed each other, so that when those ominous people returned, they would not suspect anything.”

Zhang Wuji was secretly shocked; he saw Xu Da’s face showed he did not have the heart to do so, Deng Yu looked embarrassed, Tang He sounded very proud, but Zhu Yuanzhang was the only one who maintained his composure and did not show any emotion on his face, like nothing out of ordinary happened. Zhang Wuji thought, “This man is cruel and shrewd.” He said, “Although Zhu Dage’s idea was wonderful, but from now on we must not kill innocent people so easily.”

It was their Cult Leader’s order, so Zhu Yuanzhang and the others stood up at once. They bowed and said, “We will follow Jiaozhu’s instruction.” Thereafter when Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Deng Yu, Tang He and the others went out to battle, they always observed Zhang Wuji’s order and did not dare to randomly kill innocent people. In the end they won the people’s hearts and were able to accomplish a great undertaking.

Zhang Wuji said, “Zhu Dage, the seven of you managed to find out the whereabouts of Shaolin and Wudang two sects’ masters; it was not a small merit. After arranging the strategy to fight the Yuan we will go to Dadou to rescue the two sects’ masters.”

After the official business was done, Zhang Wuji chatted with Xu Da and the others as friends. He recalled the time they stole and butchered an ox outside Zhang Yuan. They clapped their hands and laughed heartily.

That evening in the general assembly Zhang Wuji burned incense to proclaim their oath to fight a coordinated insurrection against the Yuan from various places. The Cult leaders echoed their determination to work together; their main target was to drive the Yuan army away little by little. The following was their strategy:

Cult Leader Zhang Wuji, assisted by the Brightness Left Emissary Yang Xiao and Green-winged Bat King Wei Yixiao held the 'zong tan' [lit. head/chief altar - central government] position, as the highest command for the entire Cult.

White-browed Eagle King Yin Tianzheng commanded the Heavenly Eagle Flag, making their movement in the Jiangnan area.

Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, Wu Liang, Wu Zhen, joined by Chang Yuchun's stronghold cavalry, plus Sun Deya's troops would raise their arms in Huaibei's Haozhou.

Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] and Shuo Bude were in command of Han Shantong, Liu Futong, Du Zundao, Luo Wensu, Sheng Wenyu, Wang Xianzhong, Han Jiao'er and the others, to raise their arms at Yingchuan district of Henan.

Peng Yingyu led Xu Shuohui, Zou Puwang, Ming Wudeng to fight at Jiangxi's Ganzhou, Raozhou, Yuanzhou, Xinzhou and other districts.

Tie Guan Daoren [iron hat priest] led Bu Sanwang, Meng Haima and the others raised their arms at Xiangchu and Jingxiang districts.

Zhou Dian commanded Zhi Mali, Zhao Junyong and the

others raised their arms at Xuxiu and Fengpei districts.

Leng Qian was in charge of the Ming Cult member in the western region, cutting off any Mongolian reinforcement coming to the Central Plains from the western region.

The Five-Element Flags were under 'zong tan's command, to be dispatched as necessary as the reinforcement for those who needed it.

The people were 90% sure that this strategy came from Yang Xiao and Peng Yingyu's minds.

As Zhang Wuji finished outlining their strategy, the crowd broke into a thunderous applause. Zhang Wuji also said, "Logically, we cannot rely only on our own Cult's strength to shake nearly one hundred years of Yuan's occupation. We must make good contacts with the heroes and warriors; only by pooling our strength and resources together will we be able to achieve great merits. Presently almost half of the masters of the Wulin world of Central Plains are being captured by the royal government, 'zong tan' will think of a way to rescue them. Tomorrow all of the brothers will go your own way. Fight and kill the Tartars whenever you have the opportunity. 'Zong tan' will also head for Dadou for a rescue operation. We have met and enjoy this joyous fellowship today; I don't know when we are going to see each other again in the future. Brothers, you must show loyalty to each other, give the important matter a foremost place in your heart, don't fight with each other over power and profit, don't kill each other. If any injustice of this kind is found among you, 'zong tan' will not be lenient."

The crowd shouted their answer with one voice, "We won't dare to disobey Jiaozhu's order!" Their cheers and shouts echoed throughout the valley. Afterwards everybody sealed their oath by shedding their blood and burning the incense;

determined to hold fast to their just cause in live or death.

The moon was shining brightly as it was daytime. The Ming Cult leaders sat around the banquet tables, while the staff of 'zhong tan' served some vegetable-stuffed round cakes to everybody. The round cakes looked like the moon, hence they called it 'moon cake.' Later on a legend developed that the Chinese made a pact to kill the Tartars while eating moon cake during the Mid-autumn Festival ['ba yue xiong qiu - lit. mid-autumn of the eighth month]; it was because of the Ming Cult held their assembly that evening to decide the battle strategy.

Zhang Wuji also said, "Our Cult has always had a rule passed on from generation to generation, that we don't eat meat or drink wine. But presently there are famines everywhere; we can't always choose what we eat. Moreover, our primary objective today is to drive the Tartars out. If we don't eat meat or fish our strengths will wane and it will be difficult to fight. From now on I lift up this religious rule of not eating meat and drinking wine. We live in this world must put important matter first, eating and drinking rule is trivial matter." From that time on the Ming Cult people ate the moon cake with pork stuffing.

Next day early in the morning everybody bade Zhang Wuji goodbye. Although they were warriors and brave people, but thinking about the incoming bloody battle nobody knew who would survive and who would perish. Although they were confident that they would be successful, but among the attendees of the Butterfly Valley assembly, perhaps only half of them would live; inevitably they all left with heavy hearts.

While the ceremonial fire was still ablaze in the Butterfly Valley, suddenly someone sang in a clear voice,

*"Burn my wretched body, oh raging holy fire.
What joy is in life, what pain is in death?"*

*The rest of the crowd responded in one voice,
"Burn my wretched body, oh raging holy fire.
What joy is in life, what pain is in death?
To do good and shun evil, only for brightness' cause.
Whether it is a life of happiness or sadness,
Everybody will go back to the dust.
I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!
I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!"*

The last phrase of 'I pity the mankind, with their many suffering! I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!' echoed in the Butterfly Valley. With their clothes as white as snow, the warriors came to Zhang Wuji's presence one by one, bowing their heads and salute, raised their head back up, turned around and left without looking back. Remembering that in the ten or twenty years to come, these warriors, such as Xu Da, would shed their blood for the sake of the Central Plains, Zhang Wuji could not help his eyes brim in tears.

The sound of singing was getting farther and farther away; the warriors dispersed their own separate ways. In a few moments stillness went back to reign in the Butterfly Valley, which was bustling with noise and excitement for the last several days; only Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, and Zhu Yuanzhang with his company left. Zhang Wuji asked in details the Wan An Temple's location, as well as those ominous people's appearance.

"Zhu Dage," he said, "The world is in chaos, we cannot waste any time in this insurrection. You do not need to accompany me to Dadou; let us part here."

Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others said, "We wish Jiaozhu success. Subordinates will wait to hear the good news." Bidding their farewell to Zhang Wuji, they left the valley toward their assigned post.

"We also have to leave," Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, you have shackles on your hands, you can't move easily, you better wait for me here."

Xiao Zhao agreed reluctantly, but with the pretense of sending them off she followed them going out of the valley. They had walked for three miles, she still followed them. Then three more miles, she still did not want to leave. "Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "If you send us off farther, you might not recognize the way back."

"Master Zhang," Xiao Zhao said, "Are you going to see Miss Zhao in Dadou?"

"Can't say for sure, but I might," Zhang Wuji replied.

"If you see her, will you ask her a favor on my behalf?" Xiao Zhao asked.

"What do you want her to do?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

Xiao Zhao held out her arms and said, "I want to borrow the Yitian Sword from Miss Zhao to cut this iron chain, otherwise I will not be free for the rest of my life."

Zhang Wuji could not bear to see her pitiful expression, "I am afraid she won't let me borrow her precious sword, let alone let me bring it here," he said apologetically.

"Then ... then, why don't you take me along, ask her to borrow the sword just for a moment?" Xiao Zhao asked.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "You talked in circles, in the end you want to go with me to Dadou, don't you? Yang Zuoshi, do you think we can take her along?"

Yang Xiao knew from the way Zhang Wuji speak that he wanted to take her along; he said, "I don't think that's a problem; so there is someone to take care of Jiaozhu's clothes and serve him tea. Only your iron chain's 'clink, clink, clank, clank' will be conspicuous. Let's do it this way; she pretends to be ill, then she can ride in a carriage and not come out unless it's important."

Xiao Zhao was delighted, "Many thanks Master, many thanks Yang Zuoshi," she busily said; then she cast a glance toward Wei Yixiao and said, "Many thanks, Wei Fawang [lit. law king - I think another translator translated it as 'protector king', the same 'fawang' as Jinlun Fawang of ROCH]"

"What do you thank me for?" Wei Yixiao said, "You need to be careful, if my previous sickness recurs, I am going to suck your blood." While saying that he grinned widely, showing rows of white teeth; looking very strange.

Xiao Zhao knew he was only joking, but she could not help feeling scared; she withdrew three steps backward and said, "Don't ... don't scare me."

End of Chapter 25.

Chapter 26 - Self Deformation of a Handsome Jade Face

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



He Taichong was holding a wooden sword; its body was wrapped in cloth. Standing in front of him was a burly foreign monk. In his hand was a steel blade. One weapon was sharp, the other blunt. It was clearly no competition; it was so easy to see who was strong and who was weak.

Approaching the afternoon that day, three riders and one carriage were seen galloping toward the north and in less than a day they had entered Dadou [lit. grand capital], the Yuan Dynasty's capital. By this time the power of Mongolian cavalry had reached a hundred thousands 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km], making their borders vast and wide, matchless throughout the history. Dadou later on became Beijing. It is the city where the emperor resided, where countless smaller nations and tribes sent their envoys to pay tribute.

As Zhang Wuji and his company entered the city gate they saw that a lot of people were coming and going; many of those people had yellow hair and blue eyes. Four people went to the western side of the city to find an inn for them to spend the night. Acting as a rich merchant Yang Xiao asked for three of the best rooms. The inn attendant rushed back and forth to serve them. Yang Xiao asked him about the historical sites and scenic spots around the Dadou; after a while he casually asked about ancient temples or monasteries. The inn attendant mentioned Wan An Temple of the western city first, "This Wan An Temple is situated among a thick forest; it has three big copper Buddha idols. No matter where you are going in this world, you won't find the fourth one. You should have come to visit this temple. It's a pity you have come in an unfortunate time. For the past half a year the temple has been occupied by foreign western monks; common people do not dare to come anymore."

"Occupied by foreign monks, that shouldn't be a problem, should it?" Yang Xiao asked.

The attendant stuck his tongue, he looked left and right before lowering his voice and said, "It's not that I talk too much, but honorable guests have come to the capital, you

must be careful when talking. If they see people coming in, those foreign monks will beat or even kill as they please; if they see pretty women then they will grab and take them inside the temple. They are backed by the Emperor. Who dare to swat a fly on a tiger's head by coming to those foreign monks and confront them?"

The foreign monks were backed by the Mongolian power, plundering and rampaging, oppressing the Han people, Yang Xiao and the others had long been aware of it; but they did not expect these people would unscrupulously run amuck in the capital. Thereupon they did not talk with the inn attendant any longer.

After dinner that night they stayed in their respective rooms to cultivate their energy. Around the second hour [between 1 and 3 am] three people leaped from the window, heading west.

The Wan An temple was a big four-story building, with a thirteen floor pagoda behind it, which they could see in the distant. Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao launched their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to the fullest and in a short time they had arrived at the temple. Exchanging hand signals they circled to the left, with the intention of climbing up the pagoda to take a better look of the overall temple's situation from a higher position. Unexpectedly when they were still about twenty 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 ft or 3.3 m] away from the pagoda they saw shadows of people on each floor of the pagoda, going back and forth, patrolling. It turned out that there were twenty, thirty people guarding the pagoda. As they saw this, three people were both startled and delighted at the same time, because if the pagoda was guarded this heavily, then Shaolin, Wudang, and other sects' people must be imprisoned here; hence saving them time to investigate further. Only the enemy's

guard was so heavy, their rescue effort would certainly not be easy. Much less since each one of Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, and the others had an outstanding level of martial art skill; yet they were still captured by the enemy, showing that the enemy was not only numerous, but their methods were undoubtedly fierce and cruel. Before coming to this Wan An Temple, three people had decided not to be rash and act recklessly; therefore, they quietly retreated.

Suddenly they saw a flicker of light on the sixth floor; about eight, nine people walked slowly with torches in their hands. The light moved from the sixth floor to the fifth, then from the fifth to the fourth, going down the pagoda. As they arrived at the first floor they went out the pagoda's main entrance, moving towards the back of the temple.

Yang Xiao waved his hand and slowly crept toward these people. On the rear courtyard of the temple there were old trees towering to the sky. Three people hid behind one of the trees; and as soon as the wind blew they moved several 'zhang's away to the next tree. These three people's 'qing gong' was very high, yet they only dare to move with the blowing wind and rustling leaves in fear of their movement to be detected by enemy.

Stepping stealthily they managed to move more than twenty 'zhang's. They saw around ten men wearing yellow robes, each with a weapon in his hand, escorting an old man wearing an oversized robe with wide sleeve. As that old man turned his head, Zhang Wuji could see clearly that the old man was the Kunlun Sect's Sect Leader, 'tie qin xian sheng' [Mister Iron Qin (a musical instrument)], He Taichong; Wuji could not help but shiver, "Even Mr. He is also here," he thought.

As they saw those people enter Wan An Temple's back door, three people waited for a moment. After looking around to make sure nobody else was watching, they also entered the back door quick as a flash. The temple was huge, with many rooms inside; some of the rooms looked similar to those in the Shaolin Temple. They saw bright light coming out through long windows of the main hall; and guessed this must be the room where He Taichong was detained. Three people moved swiftly toward this hall. Zhang Wuji crouched on the ground trying to take a peek inside the hall via a small crack on the long window. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao stood on either side, guarding against any possible sneak attack. Although these three people were bold and highly skilled, they were entering a tiger's den at this moment, so their hearts were anxious.

The crack on the long window was very small so Zhang Wuji only managed to see the lower part of He Taichong's body; he could not see any other people inside the hall. He heard He Taichong roar angrily, "I have already fallen into your treacherous hand; just kill me or cut me off, but don't say another word. If you want me to take an oath to be the government's hunting falcon or dog, then dream on. Even if you talk for three or five more years, you are only wasting your words."

Zhang Wuji silently nodded his head, "Although this Mr. He is not an honorable gentleman, he stands firm in critical moment; he truly befits the character of a sect leader," he thought.

He heard a man in a cold voice say, "You are so stubborn, our Master won't force you. But do you know the custom here?"

"Even if you cut all my ten fingers I still won't surrender," He

Taichong said.

“Very well,” that man said, “Let me explain it to you once again. If you can defeat three of our people, we’ll immediately release you. If you lose, we’ll cut one more of your fingers and lock you up another month. Then we’ll ask you again whether you want to surrender.”

He Taichong replied, “I’ve already lost two fingers, so what if I lose another one? Come, take your sword out!”

That man laughed coldly, “By the time you lose all your fingers, although you surrender, we won’t want a trash. Give him a sword! Mokopas, you can try him first!”

Another hoarse voice replied, “Yes!”

Zhang Wuji sent his strength to the point of his finger and gently pushed the crack to make it wider. He saw that He Taichong was holding a wooden sword; its body was wrapped in cloth. It was a soft and blunt sword; could not possibly injure anybody. Standing in front of him was a burly foreign monk. In his hand was a steel blade, flickering its bluish ray under the light. One weapon was sharp, the other blunt. It was clearly no competition; it was so easy to see who was strong and who was weak. But He Taichong was not discouraged; he shook the wooden sword in his hand and said, “Please!”

‘Swish!’ his sword hacked down swiftly and fiercely, sending out a secret move from the Kunlun Sword technique. That foreign monk, Mokopas, was big and tall, but his movement was very agile; his blade flashed back and forth, aiming He Taichong’s vital points.

Zhang Wuji only need to watch several moves before he was

shocked, “How come Mr. He’s footwork is unstable, utterly discomfited, as if he doesn’t have any internal energy at all?” he thought.

He Taichong’s sword technique was exquisite, but without internal energy, he did not differ much from an average person; the swiftness and fierceness of his sword could not be unleashed to the fullest. Fortunately that foreign monk’s martial art skill was two levels beneath his, so although the monk launched several fierce attacks, He Taichong always managed to counterattack thanks to his wonderful moves.

After about fifty moves He Taichong shouted, “Gotcha!” His sword slashed to the east and turned back to the west, slanted to the rear and then back to the front, with a light ‘bang!’ the sword hit the monk’s armpit. If it was a real sword, also if his internal strength was not gone, then the sword would have already penetrated the monk’s flesh and bone.

“Back off, Mokopas!” that cold voice said, “Unwol, your turn!”

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the owner of that cold voice. He saw a dark face, as if this person’s face was covered with a layer of black smoke, with graying grizzled beard; he was one of the Xuanming Two Elders. He stood with his hands behind his back, his eyes were partly open, as if he was indifferent to whatever was happening in front of him.

Moving his eyes forward Zhang Wuji saw a short stool covered with brocade, on which rested a pair of feet, wearing a pair of yellow satin shoes, with a pearl on the tip of each shoe. Zhang Wuji’s heart was beating faster, because he recognized these delicately beautiful feet with round

anklebones; this pair of feet belonged to Zhao Min, which he had grabbed in his hands in the Green Willow Manor. When they met at Mount Wudang, they faced each other as enemies. This time he saw this pair of delicate feet resting on a brocade stool, somehow his face turned red and his heart was beating fast. He saw Zhao Min's right foot tap the stool lightly, as if she was deeply engrossed in the martial art contest between He Taichong and Unwol.

After about the time needed to drink tea has passed, He Taichong shouted, "Gotcha!" Zhao Min raised her right foot as Unwol was defeated.

That black-faced Xuan Ming Elder said, "Unwol, back off. Helin Puhu, your turn."

Zhang Wuji heard that He Taichong's breathing was getting heavier; he knew that Mr. He must be extremely exhausted after he successively battled two people. A short moment later the fight began. Helin Puhu was using a long and big, heavy steel staff as his weapon. The gust of wind from his weapon filled the hall and the candles flickered, creating a dancing shadow like a cloud on Zhao Min's shoes. Suddenly a black shadow swept across the floor, a red candle on top of a small table on the right side of the hall was extinguished. 'Crack!' the wooden sword snapped. He Taichong heaved a long sigh and threw the sword on the floor. At last he lost the match after staking everything he got.

"Mister Iron Qin, do you surrender?" the Xuanming Elder asked.

He Taichong boldly replied, "I said I won't surrender. If I have my internal energy, how can this foreign monk be my match?"

The Xuanming Elder coldly said, "Cut his left ring finger; take him back to the pagoda."

Zhang Wuji turned his head toward Yang Xiao, and Yang Xiao shook his hand; his meaning was obvious: 'If we break into the hall to save people, then our own important matter will fail.' They heard the finger got cut, medicine applied to stop the bleeding, and the wound wrapped. He Taichong was really unyielding; he did not even utter a single grunt. The group of yellow robed men took the torch and took him back to the pagoda.

Zhang Wuji and the others shrunk back to hide behind the corner wall. Under the torch light they saw He Taichong's face was white as a sheet, his jaws were clenched, he looked really angry.

After the group walked far, a gentle and charming clear voice was heard in the hall, "Mr. Lu Zhang [lit. deer staff], Kunlun Sect's sword technique is really profound. In the stance with which he stabbed Mokopas, first he slashed to the left like this, and then turned to the right like this ..."

Zhang Wuji put his eyes back on the crack and saw that it was indeed Zhao Min. She was talking and walking toward the center of the hall, with a wooden sword in her hand, imitating He Taichong's movement earlier. The foreign monk Mokopas brandished his blade to block her sword.

That black-faced Xuanming Elder, which Zhao Min called 'Mr. Lu Zhang', short for 'Lu Zhangke', praised her, "Master's intelligence is matchless. This stance was absolutely correct."

Zhao Min practiced again and again, every time she hit Mokopas' armpit. The sword was a wooden one, but each

stab hit the same spot over and over again, causing quite a bit of pain. Mokopas turned all his attention to spar with her; he did not dare to complain or try to evade her stabs. She practiced this move until she mastered it, and then called Unwol and practiced the stance He Taichong used to defeat him earlier.

Zhang Wuji understood; it turned out Zhao Min imprisoned the experts from various sects here and drugged them to suppress their internal energy and force them to surrender to the royal government. Naturally these people would not surrender; so she ordered her people to fight with them, while she observed from the side. That way she could steal various sects' exquisite moves. Her intention was really evil; her scheme wicked, making other people's blood boil.

While she was sparring with Helin Pohu, toward the very last several stances Zhao Min hesitated and asked, "Mr. Lu Zhang, is it like this?"

Lu Zhangke hesitated without answering; he turned his head and asked, "He Xiongdi [lit. Brother Crane], did you see it clearly?"

From the left corner a voice replied, "Ku Dashi [lit. grand master 'bitter/painful' - Reverend Ku] must have seen it clearly."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Ku Dashi, I will have to bother you; please come here and give me directions."

From the right corner came a 'tou tuo' [Buddhist monk with hair]; his hair was so long that it draped over his shoulder like a cape. His stature was big and tall, his face was full of scars so that it was difficult to tell what his original face would look like. His hair and palm looked red, like he was a

middle-eastern man. Without saying anything he took the sword from Zhao Min's hand and 'swish, swish, swish, swish' he repeatedly swung it toward Helin Pohan, using Kunlun Sect's sword technique.

This so-called 'Ku Dashi', the Ku Toutuo, was using He Taichong's sword technique, also without internal energy; while Helin Pohan fought him with all his might. Toward the end his staff swept away with a strong gust of wind, extinguishing the red candle on the right hand side of the hall. He Taichong was not able to evade this move and thus was forced to parry the steel staff with his wooden sword; as a result his sword broke and he was defeated. But that Ku Toutuo's wooden sword turned around sharply; light as a feather it slid along the staff, like a swallow sweeping the water, following the staff's movement it slid upward to slice Helin Pohan's fingers which held the staff. Helin Pohan felt his palm went numb; he could not hold on to his staff. 'Clang!' it fell to the ground hitting the green brick tile making brick dust flew up.

Helin Pohan's face turned red; he knew that if the wooden sword was a real sharp one, his eight fingers would have been cut off. Bowing down he said, "My respect! I admit defeat," Then he stooped down to pick up his steel staff. Ku Toutuo held the wooden sword with both hands and gave it back to Zhao Min.

Zhao Min said with a smile, "Ku Dashi, that last move was really wonderful; was it also from the Kunlun Sect's sword technique?"

Ku Toutuo shook his head. Zhao Min continued, "No wonder He Taichong could not do it. Ku Dashi, can you teach me?"

Using his bare hand Ku Toutuo attacked Zhao Min's sword.

Sparring for the third time Ku Toutuo's hand moved lightning fast; his speed was unimaginable. Zhao Min could not match his speed; but although her sword was slower, her movement was similar to his, without the slightest amount of discrepancy. Ku Toutuo turned his body around, shot both of his hands out then stopped dead on his track.

"Good!" Zhang Wuji applauded silently, "That was brilliant!"

For a moment Zhao Min did not understand, leaning her head sideways she stared at Ku Toutuo's position. After thinking for a while she finally understood. "Ah, Ku Dashi, if you were holding a weapon, then the staff would break my arm," she said, "How do you counter it?"

Ku Toutuo made a movement of flipping his hand and grabbing the steel staff. His left foot flew up, his head raised up; he simultaneously snatched the enemy's staff and kicked. This movement looked clumsy, but actually it was a very skillful movement of martial art from outside the great wall.

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Good Shifu, quickly teach me." Her expression was tender and flattering.

Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat. He thought, "Your internal energy is not enough, you can't learn it. But the way she asked made it difficult for others to refuse."

Ku Toutuo made two hand signals; his meaning was obvious, 'You don't have enough internal energy, you can't learn this move.' Then he turned around and ignored her.

Zhang Wuji pondered in his heart, "Ku Toutuo's martial art is strong; I am afraid he is not below the Xuanming Elders. I don't know his internal energy level, but his movements

were exquisite. He is truly a formidable opponent. He keeps making hand signals, but did not speak a single word; could it be that he is mute? But he definitely is not deaf. Miss Zhao is very respectful to him; he is obviously a character with an extraordinary background.”

Seeing Ku Toutuo was not willing to teach her Zhao Min was not angry; she showed a faint smile and said, “Take Kongtong Sect’s Tang Wenliang here.”

Not too long afterwards Tang Wenliang was ushered into the hall. Again Lu Zhangke ordered three of his men to fight with him. Tang Wenliang was not willing to suffer defeat under a weapon, so with bare hands he fought against the enemy’s palms. He won the first two matches; but on the third match his opponent used internal energy. Tang Wenliang was not able to resist and he lost one of his fingers. Again Zhao Min practiced according to what she just saw while Lu Zhangke gave directions from the side.

It dawned on Zhang Wuji that Zhao Min realized her internal energy was insufficient and it was difficult to cultivate internal energy intensively; so she wanted to learn the martial arts of various sects’ sect leaders and experts. This method was not only more feasible, but by practicing the most exquisite of each skill she might be able to greatly make up of her own inadequacy.

After practicing the fist technique Zhao Min said, “Call the Old Nun Miejue!”

One of the yellow-robed men said, “The Old Nun Miejue has gone on a hunger strike for five days. She is still as stubborn as ever; not willing to take any order.”

“Starve her to death, then!” Zhao Min smiled, “Hey, call that

Emei Sect's young girl, Zhou Zhiruo." Her subordinate complied; he turned around and went out the hall.

Zhang Wuji remembered Zhou Zhiruo had cared for him attentively on the boat in Han River; he felt that he owed her a debt of gratitude. On the Brightness Peak Zhou Zhiruo also helped him by giving him pointers on positions, so that he was able to defeat the Huashan Sect and Kunlun Sect's Saber and Sword Combination Technique; later on she stabbed him with her sword, but it was because she was following her Shifu's strict order, so he did not hold it against her. Now that he heard Zhao Min's order to get her, his heart was shaken.

A short moment later the group of yellow-robed men came back, ushering Zhou Zhiruo into the hall. Zhang Wuji saw that she was as beautiful as he remembered her; only compared to at the Brightness Peak she was slightly thinner and paler. Although imprisoned by the enemy, she managed to maintain her composure as if she had already disregarded life and death.

As usual Lu Zhangke asked if she was willing to surrender or not. Zhou Zhiruo simply shook her head without saying anything. Lu Zhangke was about to send someone to fight with her when Zhao Min said, "Miss Zhou, you are very young, yet you are one of Emei Sect's martial art experts; that is truly something to be envious of. I heard you are Reverend Mie Jue's protégé and have mastered her profound swordsmanship, is that true?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "My Master's martial art is so broad and deep; let's just say that she [here the term used was 'lao ren jia' - Senior] has passed all her knowledge to me, I am [here the term used was 'xiao nu zi' - a little girl] young and my understanding is shallow, I fall far too short."

Zhao Min smiled, "The rule is as long as you can defeat three of our people, then we'll let you go, free and unharmed; we won't trouble you anymore. Why is your honorable master so proud that she disdains to compare martial art with us?" she asked.

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "My Master prefers death over disgrace. She is the Sect Leader of Emei; how could she ask for mercy from your subordinate? What you said was not wrong; my Master certainly look down upon contemptible, evil woman and lowly people. Of course she disdains fighting with you."

Surprisingly Zhao Min was not angry; she still smiled and asked, "How about you, Miss Zhou?"

"I am but a little girl, what do I have to say?" Zhou Zhiruo answered, "Whatever Shifu said, I follow."

"Your honorable master also forbade you to fight with us, didn't she?" Zhao Min asked, "Why is that?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Although Emei Sect's sword technique is not the greatest technique there is, it is still the Central Plains' major sect's martial art; certainly we cannot allow some shameless barbarian captors to steal it." She spoke with a refined manner, but her words were sharp, in total disregard of other people's feeling.

Zhao Min was startled; she did not expect Miejue Shitai to correctly guess her true intention. She heard Zhou Zhiruo first said 'evil woman, lowly people', then she said, 'shameless barbarian'; she could not bear her anger. 'Swish!' the Yitian Sword appeared in her hand. "Your Shifu cursed us as shameless barbarians. Fine! Let me ask you this: this Yitian Sword is obviously my family's treasure; how could

the Emei steal it?"

Zhou Zhiruo indifferently said, "Yitian Sword and Tulong [slaying dragon] Saber have always been the Central Plain Wulin world's precious weapons. I have never heard they have anything to do with a barbarian woman."

Zhao Min's face turned completely red; "Humph!" she angrily said, "I did not know your tongue is actually very sharp. So you are determined not to fight with us?" Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. Zhao Min said, "I always cut a finger of those other people who lost in the martial art match or simply refuse to fight. You, this little girl, must be very proud of your beautiful face; no wonder you are so arrogant. I am not going to cut your finger." While saying that she pointed her finger toward Ku Toutuo and continued, "I am going to make you as this Reverend; I am going to add twenty, thirty sword marks on your face. I want to see if you are still arrogant." She waved her left hand and immediately two of the yellow-robed men came forward to grab Zhou Zhiruo's arms. Zhao Min smiled and said, "I want to turn your smart face into a honeycomb; and I don't need Emei's exquisite sword technique to do that. Do you think I can't turn you into an ugly clown with my 'three-legged cat' skill?"

Tears started to well up Zhou Zhiruo's eyes; her body started to tremble. She saw the tip of the Yitian Sword was only a few inches apart from her own cheeks. She knew as soon as this demon moved her hand, her face would look like that ugly and fearsome 'toutuo'.

"Are you scared?" Zhao Min asked with a smile. Zhou Zhiruo did not dare to act strong anymore; she nodded her head. "Good!" Zhao Min said, "Do you surrender?"

"I won't surrender!" Zhou Zhiruo said, "Just kill me!"

Zhao Min smiled and said, "I've never killed anybody; I only want to cut a little bit of your skin and flesh." A cold ray flashed; the sword in Zhao Min's hand slashed toward Zhou Zhiruo's face.

'Bang!' suddenly something was thrown from outside, hitting the Yitian Sword. At the same time the long window broke and someone flew into the hall; throwing the two yellow-robed men who held Zhou Zhiruo's arms outside. The person who broke the window and flew in turned his left arm around to protect Zhou Zhiruo, while at the same time stretched out his right arm to block Lu Zhangke's palm. 'Bang!' both people staggered two steps backward.

Everybody turned their eyes toward this person; he was none other than the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, Zhang Wuji. His entrance was so sudden like he descended from the sky; everybody was shocked. Even masters like the Xuanming Elders did not expect anything like this that they were caught off guard.

Lu Zhangke heard the window burst; immediately he rushed to the front of Zhao Min's body to protect her. He used all his strength to strike Zhang Wuji; but to his surprise his legs wobbled and he staggered back two steps. He was about to attack in anger when suddenly he felt an unbearable dry heat on his body, as if he was entering a hot furnace.

Zhou Zhiruo saw an impending doom in front of her eyes, but unexpectedly someone suddenly came to her rescue. Finding herself in Zhang Wuji's embrace, Zhou Zhiruo was conscious of his broad and solid chest and smelling a whiff of a strong male breath; she was pleasantly surprised. In an instant she felt her body weaken and she almost passed out. She did not know that Zhang Wuji had used the 'jiu yang

shen gong' [nine yang (positive) divine energy] to block Lu Zhangke's 'xuan ming shen zhang' [mysteriously dark/deep divine palm]; the pure 'qi' in his body came out. Zhou Zhiruo had never been this close to a male body before; moreover, this man was the one who was always in her mind day and night, even in her dreams. She felt an indescribable joy in her heart, so even though all around her the enemies threatened to cut her with a thousand blades and ten thousands swords she had nothing to worry, she had nothing to fear.

As soon as they saw their Cult Leader break in to rescue someone, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao followed quick as a flash and stood behind him on either side. At first the martial art experts under Zhao Min's command were thrown into confusion; but very soon they saw that only three enemies broke into the hall. The guards outside and inside the hall exchanged some whistles, confirming that there was no other enemy outside. Immediately they moved to guard all doors, waiting quietly for Zhao Min's order.

Zhao Min was neither alarmed nor afraid, she was not even angry; she only looked at Zhang Wuji with a startled look on her face. She turned her gaze toward the two pieces of bright golden objects on the corner of the hall. When she swung the Yitian Sword toward Zhou Zhiruo's face Zhang Wuji threw something to block the sword. Turned out that object was the golden case she gave him as a souvenir. The Yitian Sword was very sharp that it cut the golden case into two halves on contact. She stared at those two golden pieces for a long time before saying, "Do you hate this box so much that you want to break it?"

Zhang Wuji noticed her gaze was full of quiet resentment; not anger, but more sorrow because of desires being cut short. He was startled; apologetically and in a soft voice he

said, "I did not bring any secret projectile; in a hurry I reached into my pocket and took this box out. It was really unintentional. I hope Miss do not mind it."

Zhao Min's eyes shone, "Do you always carry this box with you?" she asked.

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied. Suddenly he realized Zhao Min's beautiful eyes were staring at him; while his left arm was still hugging Zhou Zhiruo. He blushed slightly then loosened up his arm.

Zhao Min sighed and said, "I didn't know Miss Zhou is your ... your good friend; otherwise I wouldn't treat her this way. Turned out you two are ..." She did not finish her words and turned her head away.

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhou and I ... we are not ... it's only ... it's only ..." He said 'it's only' twice, but actually he did not know what to say.

Zhao Min turned her gaze back toward those two halves of the golden box on the floor; she did not say anything, but her eyes actually spoke a thousand words. Zhou Zhiruo's heart was stirred, "This female demon is very passionate toward him; could it be ..."

But Zhang Wuji actually did not share these two girls' sentiment; he only partially understood Zhao Min's dazed expression, but did not realize the profound meaning behind it. He thought Zhao Min gave him the pearl head ornament and the golden case with which he cured Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting, yet now he had broken the golden case; he felt he was being inappreciative toward others. Thereupon he walked to the corner of the hall, bent down to pick the two halves of the golden case and said, "I will find a skilled

craftsman to have it fixed.”

“Really?” Zhao Min happily asked.

Zhang Wuji nodded; but in his heart he thought, ‘You and I both command countless warriors, how can we be worried about such an insignificant silver and gold matter? Although this golden case is exquisite, it is not a rare treasure. The ‘hei yu duan xu gao’ [black jade break connecting (or fracture healing) paste] hidden inside the box has already taken out, then the box does not have much usefulness anymore; so what if it is broken? Putting them back together is also a minor matter; presently we have many important matters to deal, but you actually worry about this box; you are such a fussy little girl, who cares much about such a trivial matter. Such a typical woman.’ Immediately he put the golden box pieces into his pocket.

“Then off you go!” Zhao Min said.

Zhang Wuji thought Song Da Shibo [First Martial (older) Uncle] and the others had not been rescued yet; how could he leave just like that? But the enemy’s experts surrounded them like a cloud, while there only three people on his side; so speaking about rescue was easier said than done. “Miss Zhao,” he asked, “Why did you capture my Da Shibo and the others?”

Zhao Min smiled, “My intention is good; I want to advise them to be loyal to the royal government, then everybody will enjoy splendor, riches and honor together. Who would have thought that they are so stubborn and don’t want to listen. I have no choice but to slowly persuade them.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted; turning around he returned to Zhou Zhiruo’s side. With the enemy all around him he

walked toward the box, picked it up and returned to his original position, all with calm and composed manners, as if there were nobody else there. He swept his cold gaze around and said, "Since that is the case, we'll take our leave then!" Taking Zhou Zhiruo's hand he turned around to leave.

Zhao Min hastily said, "You want to leave then just leave. But if you want to take Miss Zhou along without asking my permission; what kind of person do you think I am?"

"It is really inappropriate for me to do that," Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, will you release Miss Zhou and let her go with me?"

Zhao Min did not answer; she cast a meaningful glance toward the Xuanming Elders. He Biweng [lit. old man crane pen] moved forward one step. "Zhang Jiaozhu," he said, "You come and go as you like, you want to rescue others as you like; where do you think we should place our old faces? If you don't demonstrate some special skills, I am afraid we brothers will have difficulty submitting to you."

Zhang Wuji recognized He Biweng's voice; anger welled up his chest. He roared, "You captured me when I was small and made my life nearly gone. Today you still have a face to speak to me? Take this!" With a loud grunt he sent out a palm toward He Biweng.

Lu Zhangke had just suffered a defeat; he knew He Biweng's strength was not Zhang Wuji's match. Rushing forward he shot a palm toward him. Zhang Wuji's right palm was still moving toward He Biweng, his left palm moved underneath his right arm to block Lu Zhangke's palm. Pure internal energy met pure internal energy, there was not the slightest margin of error. Three people, four palms. As soon as they met, they all staggered back.

When they were at the Wudang Mountain the Xuanming Elders had exchanged palm strikes with Zhang Wuji and managed to land a couple of slaps on his body. This moment they wanted to repeat the same trick, also with two palms striking together. But that day Zhang Wuji had suffered defeat once; how could he let himself fall into the same trick? His elbows shrunk slightly launching the 'qian kun da nuo yi' technique; 'Clap!' He Biweng's left fist landed above Lu Zhangke's right palm. These two men's received the same instructions from their master; their palm techniques were similar, their strengths were also more or less the same. They both felt their arms go numb and were confused as how could they, martial brothers, strike each other? Although their martial art skills were high, they did not understand this profound mystery.

While those two men were startled and angry, Zhang Wuji's palms had arrived. Each of the Xuanming Elders launched their palms; one to counterattack, the other to block. They used a totally different move from the previous one, but Zhang Wuji still used the same technique to lead Lu Zhangke's left palm to strike above He Biweng's right palm. Zhang Wuji executed the 'qian kun da nuo yi' technique skillfully and with great precision that his attack arrived at an unthinkable condition.

While the Xuanming Elders were still stunned Zhang Wuji's third palm strike arrived; as if by prior agreement each of them lifted a palm to block. Three people's pure energy collided; the Xuanming Elders felt their opponent's 'yang' [positive] energy surge in, it was difficult to block. Zhang Wuji's palm technique was like the wind; he recalled his many years of sufferings when he was little and was struck by He Biweng's Xuanming Divine Palm. For that reason his palm strike was a little bit lenient toward Lu Zhangke, he did

not give any leeway to He Biweng.

Twenty or so palms later He Biweng's greenish face had turned completely red. Seeing the opponent's palm strike, he raised his left palm trying to fend it off, while his right palm is slanting down heavily. 'Slap! Slap!' He Biweng's palm fiercely hit Lu Zhangke's shoulder. In the end he still failed to fend off Zhang Wuji's palm, which hit him squarely on his chest. Luckily Zhang Wuji had never had any intention to take his life; thus he only used 30% of his strength. With a 'wah' noise He Biweng spurted a mouthful of blood. His face from red turned to purple, his body swayed; if Zhang Wuji took advantage of this situation and launched another palm strike, his life would be gone right there and then. Lu Zhangke's shoulder was also so painful that his face greatly changed and his lips bleed from his own biting.

The Xuanming Elders had always been Zhao Min's most capable subordinates; who would have thought that both of them were injured in under thirty moves? No wonder the rest of Zhao Min's warriors were flabbergasted; even Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao were astonished. They had seen it with their own eyes how on Wudang Mountain the Xuanming Elders had injured Zhang Wuji with their palms; surprisingly in just several months he had made a tremendous progress. But they also remembered that in these last several months while treating Yu Daiyan and Yi Liting's injuries on Mount Wudang, Zhang Wuji had also consulted Zhang Sanfeng on the subtle and profoundly deep study of the martial arts; finally he was able to combine the 'jiu yang shen gong' [nine 'yang' (positive) divine skill], 'qian kun da nuo yi' [great shifting of the universe], plus Wudang's 'tai ji chuan jian' [Taiji's fist and sword], three martial arts into one. They were secretly praising Zhang Sanfeng's divine knowledge, which could be called 'shen bu ke ce' [immeasurably deep],

four characters.

As the two Xuanming Elders were defeated, they howled and took their weapons out. In Lu Zhangke's hand there was a short stick with a forked head, resembling a pair of deer antlers. The body of the stick was dark; it was unclear what the stick was made of. He Biweng's hands were grasping a pair of pens; the tip of the pens was sharp, shaped like a crane's beak. The pens glistened with crystal-like rays. These two people had followed Zhao Min for quite a while, but even Zhao Min had never seen them using their weapons. As these three weapons were launched, one black shadow and two white lights were seen; surrounding Zhang Wuji in their midst.

Zhang Wuji did not bring any weapons with him; with only his bare hand and empty fist, his situation was quite disadvantageous. But he was not scared one bit. He determined to test his own martial art against these two powerful opponents; he wanted to see if he would be able to score victory barehanded.

The Xuanming Elders had always relied on their profound internal energy, the Xuanming Divine Palms was a lost art of the martial art world; yet as soon as they went into battle against Zhang Wuji's palms, his 'jiu yang shen gong' was actually so unfathomable that in dozens of palms they were defeated.

When using their weapons, these two people oftentimes scored victory because of their strange moves. Their names actually came from their weapons, 'lu jiao duan zhang' [deer antler short stick] and 'he zui shuang bi' [crane beak pair of pens]. Each of their moves was swift, fierce and very ruthless; rarely seen in the world.

With total concentration Zhang Wuji launched attacks and put up defenses among the weapons, but momentarily he had not yet understood his opponents' movements; so it would not be easy to score any victory. Luckily He Biweng was severely wounded and his movements were unavoidably sluggish.

In the meantime Zhao Min lightly clapped her hands three times and naked blades dazzled in the hall. Three men attacked Yang Xiao, four people attacked Wei Yixiao, and two pointed the tip of their weapons on Zhou Zhiruo's back. Yang Xiao snatched a sword and brandished it lightning fast, stabbing a man attacking his back. Wei Yixiao used his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] as his weapon and slapped two people with his 'xuan yin mian zhang' [dark cloud cotton palm]. But in reality the enemies were too many, for every man down, two came out to take his place; while Zhang Wuji was engaged in a fierce battle against the Xuanming Elders and was not able to lend them a hand. It would not be too difficult for the three of them to escape, but certainly it was almost impossible if they wanted to take Zhou Zhiruo along.

While they were anxious, suddenly Zhao Min shouted, "Everybody hold your hands!" Her voice was not too loud, but her subordinates obeyed her and immediately leaped backward.

Yang Xiao tossed his sword to the ground. Wei Yixiao had just snatched a blade from an enemy's hand; he turned it around and threw it back to its owner, while laughing a big laugh. Seeing someone was still holding a dagger on Zhou Zhiruo's back; Zhang Wuji could not help but feeling anxious and it showed on his face.

With a sad voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "Zhang Gongzi [young master, a respectful term to address a young man], please

leave. Xiao Nuzi [little/young girl] is deeply grateful of three gentlemen's kind intention."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Zhang Gongzi, I feel sad to destroy such a beautiful face like this. Surely she is your beloved?"

Zhang Wuji blushed; he said, "Miss Zhou and I have known each other since we were little. When I was a child I was hit by this man's ..." he pointed to He Biweng, "... Xuanming Divine Palm. The cold poison entered my body and made me difficult to move. I was lucky this Miss Zhou helped me eating and drinking. I do not dare to forget her kindness."

"So you were childhood friends," Zhao Min said, "You are thinking of making her the Devil Cult's Madame Cult Leader, aren't you?"

Zhang Wuji blushed even deeper. "The barbarians have not yet been extinguished, how can I think of raising a family?" he said.

Zhao Min's face darkened. "You surely want to destroy me very much, don't you?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "Until now I still do not know Miss' origin," he said, "Although our paths have crossed several times, every time it was Miss who seeks out Zhang Wuji; it wasn't the Old Zhang who looks for trouble with Miss. I will be deeply grateful if Miss is willing to let my martial uncles and the Wulin warriors from various sects go; I wouldn't dare to seek enmity with Miss. Moreover, Miss still has to tell me three matters, which I will strive to carry them out, in no way will I refuse your command."

Zhao Min could hear the sincerity in his voice, her face

brightened like a fresh flower just blossomed. She smiled and said, "Hey, you haven't forgotten that." Turning her head toward Zhou Zhiruo she said to Zhang Wuji, "This Miss Zhou is not your beloved, she is neither your martial sister, nor your fiancé; so if I want to destroy her face, it has nothing to do with you ..." She cast a sidelong glance; Lu Zhangke and He Biweng immediately raised their weapons in front of Zhou Zhiruo, while another man raised a sharp dagger toward her cheeks.

If Zhang Wuji wanted to save her, he would have to break the Xuanming Elders' defense line; which was not easy. Zhao Min coldly said, "Zhang Gongzi, you'd better tell me the truth."

All of a sudden Wei Yixiao held out his palms and spat some saliva on them. He rubbed his palms several times to the sole of his shoes, and laughed a big laugh. Nobody knew what kind of crafty trick he was about to perform; suddenly a green shadow flashed. Zhao Min felt her left and right cheeks were rubbed by a palm. She looked at Wei Yixiao and found him stood on his original position, but now in his hands were two daggers; it was not clear whom he snatched the daggers from. Zhao Min realized things were not good; she did not dare to rub her own cheeks, but took a handkerchief and wiped her face. She saw her handkerchief was black with some mud, and knew instantly that it was the dirt from Wei Yixiao's shoes plus his saliva. This thought made her sick that she almost threw up.

Wei Yixiao said, "Miss Zhao, whether you want to destroy Miss Zhou's face or not, it is up to you. You are cruel and merciless; I, the one with surname Wei, cannot stop you. Just know this: today you cut Miss Zhou's face once, the one surnamed Wei will double it; I will cut your face twice. You cut her face twice, I will cut yours four times. You break one

finger of hers, I will break two of yours.” Speaking to this point he struck the daggers in his hands to each other and continued, “What the one surnamed Wei wants to do, he can do it. ‘Qing Yi Fu Wang’ [The Green Winged Bat King] will do what he says. All my life I have never said an empty talk. You can guard against me for a year or a year and a half, but not for eight years, ten years. You can send your people to kill me, but I doubt they will be able to pursue me. I take my leave now!” When the word ‘now’ came out of his mouth, he had already disappeared.

‘Slap! Slap!’ two daggers flew and struck a pillar; followed by “Aiyo! Ah!” screams, two foreign monks in the hall slowly sat down. Somehow the swords in their hands were snatched by Wei Yixiao; while their acupoints were also sealed by him.

Wei Yixiao’s words were spoken lightly, but everybody knew it was not idle talk; they saw with their own eyes that Zhao Min white cheeks, which were red from rouge earlier, were smeared black by Wei Yixiao’s dirt. If he was holding knives in his hands, Zhao Min’s cheeks would have been destroyed. His movement to her and back was lightning fast; it was like a ghost or a demon’s movement; certainly no experts would be able to guard against him. Even Zhang Wuji felt ashamed of his own inferiority. In a long distance race Zhang Wuji would be able to win relying on his stronger internal energy, but moving in the courtyard or between the porch and the veranda nobody could match this person’s divine speed.

Zhang Wuji bowed and saluted. “Miss Zhao,” he said, “We have offended you today; we’ll take our leave now.” Taking Yang Xiao’s hand he turned around and went out the hall. He knew with Wei Yixiao’s threat Zhao Min would not dare to harm Zhou Zhiruo. Zhao Min looked at his back with mixed feelings: ashamed and angry; but she did not command her people to block their way.

Zhang Wuji and Yang Xiao returned to the inn; Wei Yixiao was already waiting for them there. Zhang Wuji laughed and said, “Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei], today you have given them a demonstration of your prowess, letting them know not to easily provoke the Ming Cult.”

“It wasn’t difficult to scare a little girl,” Wei Yixiao said, “She can pretend to be fierce and wicked, but as she heard me wanting to destroy her face, I guarantee you she won’t be able to sleep for three whole days and three whole nights.”

Yang Xiao smiled and said, “She can’t sleep; that’s not good. It will make our effort to rescue people more difficult.”

“Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang],” said Zhang Wuji, “Speaking of rescuing people, do you have any ingenious plan?”

Yang Xiao hesitated. “We are only three people, plus our presence is already known; it is truly a thorny problem,” he said.

Zhang Wuji apologetically said, “When I saw Miss Zhou’s dire situation I could not bear not to help. In the end I messed up an important matter.”

“The way the turn of events went, nobody could bear not to help,” Yang Xiao said, “Single-handedly Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] defeated the Xuanming Elders and that can crush the enemy’s spirit big time; that was also very good. Moreover, now that they know we are here, they won’t dare to treat Song Daxia [great hero Song] and the others too rudely.”

Zhang Wuji remembered that his Song Dabo [first (older)

uncle], Yu Erbo [second (older) uncle] and the others were still in the enemy's hand; and then seeing how Zhao Min has treated He Taichong, Tang Wenliang and the others with disgrace, his heart burned with anxiety.

Three people discussed their course of action for half a day without reaching any conclusion; finally they went their separate rooms to rest.

Toward the dawn the following morning Zhang Wuji was still half dreaming when he heard a noise from the window; he woke up immediately and opened his eyes wide only to see the window slowly open. There was someone outside staring at him. He was startled. Lifting up the bed curtain he saw that person's face was filled with scars, he looked fearsomely ugly; it was none other than Ku Toutuo. Zhang Wuji was even more shocked; he immediately jumped out of bed, but Ku Toutuo's face was still at the window, staring blankly at him. It seemed like Ku Toutuo did not mean any harm to him. "Yang Zuoshi! Wei Fuwang!" Zhang Wuji called out.

Yang and Wei two people responded from the neighboring rooms. Zhang Wuji was slightly relieved. In the meantime Ku Toutuo's face disappeared from the window. Zhang Wuji hastily jumped out the window and saw Ku Toutuo go out the front gate in a hurry. By this time Yang and Wei two people had also caught up. Looking around to see there was no other enemy, three people moved their feet to pursue Ku Toutuo.

Ku Toutuo was waiting on a street corner. As he saw the three people approach, he turned around and went to the north. His strides were big, but he was not running. Three people exchanged hand signals and followed behind. By that time it was daybreak, not too many people were outside; so in a short moment they had reached the northern gate. Ku

Toutuo continued leading the way along a small pathway. About seven, eight 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5km] later they arrived at a small mound with rocks scattered around it. At last Ku Toutuo stopped and turned around; he waved his hands toward Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, asking them to step back, following which he cupped his fists in respect toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji returned the salute while thinking in his heart, "I wonder what is this Toutuo's intention in leading us here? There is nobody else here, if we fight, with one against three, he would surely lost. Judging by this, he doesn't seem to have an ill intention."

Before Zhang Wuji made his mind up, Ku Toutuo had already made a 'heh, heh' noise, then he attacked with his hands in the form of claws: tiger claw on his left hand, dragon claw on his right hand; all ten fingers in the shape of hooks, ferociously attacked Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji diverted the attack by a sweep of his left palm; he said, "Shangren [lit. upper/above person, a respectful term to address a Buddhist monk], what is your intention? Please make it clear; we can always fight later."

Ku Toutuo did not pay him any attention, as if he did not hear anything. His left hand tiger claw changed into an eagle claw, his right hand dragon claw changed into a tiger claw; one attacked the opponent's left shoulder, the other attacked the right abdomen. The attacks were very vicious.

"Do we really have to fight?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Ku Toutuo's eagle claw turned into a lion palm, his tiger claw turned into a crane beak; one struck the other pecked, in an ever-changing style. In a short three stances he had already

used six different styles.

Zhang Wuji did not dare to slack off; he immediately launched the 'Taiji Chuan' [taiji fist]. His body moved like the passing clouds or flowing water, fighting his opponent on that stone mound. He felt this Ku Toutuo's movements were very complicated; sometimes they were wide open and easily predicted, but just they turn surreptitiously strange as swift, like the martial art from a demonical unorthodox sect, casting a profound heretical, almost evil, air around him, but all along Zhang Wuji only used Taiji Chuan to fight him.

After about seventy, eighty stances later Ku Toutuo suddenly grunted and shot his fist straight forward. Zhang Wuji used the 'ru feng si bi' [Apparent Closure] to seal his fist power, followed by the move 'dan bian' [Single Whip] his left palm slapped Ku Toutuo's back; only he did not exert any internal energy, as soon as he touched his back, Zhang Wuji withdrew his palm.

Ku Toutuo knew Zhang Wuji was showing him mercy; he leaped backward and stared at Zhang Wuji for half a day. Suddenly he made a hand signal to Yang Xiao, indicating he wanted to borrow the long sword on Yang Xiao's waist. Yang Xiao loosened up the sword belt and presented the sword, complete with the sheath, with both hands to Ku Toutuo.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "How can Yang Zuoshi lend a weapon to the enemy?" he thought.

Ku Toutuo drew the sword and made a hand signal, telling Zhang Wuji to borrow Wei Yixiao's sword. Zhang Wuji shook his head; he took the sword sheath from Ku Toutuo's left hand, and with a 'qing shou' [invitation] stance he used the sheath as a sword. With his left hand he pinched the tip of the sheath and positioned the sheath horizontally in front of

his chest.

Ku Toutuo swept the sword and stabbed diagonally down. Zhang Wuji had seen him teaching sword technique to Zhao Min, so he knew this man had a superb swordsmanship. At once he focused his attention to use the Taiji Sword he had learned for the past several months on Mount Wudang. He saw that the opponent's sword moved sometimes fast sometimes slow, with the blade seemingly everywhere; but Zhang Wuji was always able to block or divert the attack. Ku Toutuo withdrew immediately and re-attacked with new stances; yet not a single one of them was able to penetrate Zhang Wuji's defense.

Zhang Wuji silently praised him, "If I fought this man half a year ago, I certainly would not be his match in swordsmanship. Compared to that 'ba bi shen jian' [Eight-armed Divine Sword] Fang Dongbai this Ku Toutuo is a notch better." He started to feel fondness toward him and decided not to score victory too conspicuously.

Ku Toutuo brandished his sword like a 'luan pi feng' [tornado]; the blade of his sword glistened under the sun as if ten thousands metal snakes scurried around the opponent. Zhang Wuji looked clearly and then abruptly turned the sword sheath around. 'Shua!' the sword entered its sheath perfectly while both of his hands shot out and lightly touched Ku Toutuo's wrists. Smiling slightly Zhang Wuji leaped back. If he made any effort ever so slightly, he would have been able to seize the sword. This move to seize the sword was really dangerous; but it also demonstrated his excellent skill.

Before Zhang Wuji's feet landed on the ground Ku Toutuo dropped the sword and with a grunt sent out his palm forward. Zhang Wuji heard the gust of wind and knew that

this palm carried a lot of strength. It was truly not a small matter; obviously the opponent was testing his internal strength. He turned his right palm around and met the incoming palm head-on, while his left foot finally touched the ground.

In an instant Ku Toutuo's force flowed out like a stream. Zhang Wuji used the power of the seventh level of 'qian kun da nuo yi' to gradually dissipate the incoming force. Suddenly he shouted loudly and pushed back; it was like the dam on a mountain lake suddenly burst and the water flooded out with an earth shattering force. Zhang Wuji was actually returning Ku Toutuo's palm strength to its owner. It was the combination of ten opponent's palm strength into one; the world had never seen such force. If Ku Toutuo was hit, his wrist bone, arm bone, shoulder bone, and his ribs would be broken; blood would spurt out and he would have turned into a heap of shapeless pulp as he died a miserable death.

At this moment a pair of palms stuck to each other. It was impossible for Ku Toutuo to escape. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's left hand grabbed his chest and flung him up; Ku Toutuo's big body flew up. With a loud 'Bang!' the rocks behind him flew all over the place. Zhang Wuji's matchless palm strength had hit the rocks on that mound.

Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, who were watching from the side, both cried out in alarm. They knew Ku Toutuo and their cult leader were staking it all in that internal energy competition. They thought it would take at least the time needed to drink tea for the match to reach its conclusion; who would have thought that the moment of life and death had arrived in just a short time. These two had a lot in their mind to say, but it was too late for them to open their mouths. Now that Ku Toutuo had landed on the ground, safe and sound, their

palms were wet with cold sweats.

As his feet touched the ground Ku Toutuo's hands made a sign like a blazing flame in front of his chest; he bowed to pay his respect to Zhang Wuji and said, "Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly person] is 'guang ming you zhi' [Right Emissary of the Brightness] Fan Yao; I pay my respect to Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]. I thank Jiaozhu for sparing my life. Xiao Ren also asks forgiveness for my offensive behavior." He had never talked for more than ten years, so his intonation was rather unnatural.

Zhang Wuji was pleasantly surprised; not only this mute Ku Toutuo could talk, but he was also his own Cult's Right Emissary of the Brightness. It was truly beyond what he expected. He busily held out his hands to raise him up and said, "It turns out that you are our Cult's Fan Youshi [Right Emissary Fan]. I am extremely happy. We are family, so you don't have to be overly courteous."

Actually when they arrived at the rock mound, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao had already guessed with 30% certainty; only Fan Yao's appearance was greatly changed that they did not dare to say anything. When he displayed his martial art, they were 70, 80% sure; now that he mentioned his own name, they rushed forward held his hands tightly. Yang Xiao stared at his face for half a day with tears streaming down his face. "Fan Xiongdi [Brother Fan]," he said, "Gege [big brother] missed you very much."

Fan Yao hugged Yang Xiao and said, "Da Ge [big brother], we should be thankful for 'Ming Zun's [Translator's note: I don't know how to translate this properly. I am guessing that Fan Yao was referring to the Ming Cult founder (or prophet).] blessing and protection, that we have such a highly capable Jiaozhu, and that we brothers can see each other again."

“Xiongdi,” Yang Xiao said, “How did your appearance change like this?”

“If I didn’t deform my own face, how can I deceive that traitor, the ‘hun yuan pi li shou’ [Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun?” Fan Yao said.

As soon as they heard him, they realized that he intentionally destroyed his own face to get close to the enemy. Yang Xiao’s heart was moved. “Xiongdi,” he said, “You have suffered greatly.” In the past Yang Xiao and Fan Yao were known in Jianghu as the ‘Xiao Yao Er Xian’ [Xiao and Yao, two immortals]; because they both were outstandingly handsome men. Fan Yao had deliberately made his own face unbearably ugly; truly not many people could match his pain and suffering.

Wei Yixiao had never been close to Fan Yao; but this time he could not help but be deeply moved. He knelt down and saluted, “Fan Youshi,” he said, “Today Wei Yixiao truly submits to you.”

Fan Yao also knelt down to return his salute. Smiling he said, “Wei Fuwang’s ‘qing gong’ [lightness kungfu] is matchless in this world. Your divine skill is even better than in the past. Last night Ku Toutuo broadened his outlook.”

Yang Xiao looked around and said, “This place is not too far from the city; the enemy has ears and eyes everywhere. We’d better go farther up and talk on the mountain ahead.”

Four people ran for about ten ‘li’s and stop on the back of a small hill, where they were able to see for several ‘li’s around and thus did not have to worry anybody would hide and listen secretly, yet from a distant nobody would be able to

see them. They sat down and told each other what happened after they were separated.

That year Yang Dingtian suddenly disappeared without any trace; the Ming Cult's leaders fought with each other over the Cult Leader position. Nobody was willing to submit, so the Cult split up. Fan Yao still believed their Cult Leader had not passed away, so he wandered the Jianghu alone to look for his whereabouts. Several years passed and he had not found the slightest trail. Afterwards he thought that perhaps their Cult Leader was harmed by the Beggar Clan, so he secretly captured many Beggar Clan's important people and tortured them to force a confession; still he did not find any clue, while in the process he had killed many innocent Beggar Clan members.

Later on he heard the escalating sharp dispute among the Ming Cult leaders; some people even went everywhere looking for him, they wanted to appeal to him. Fan Yao had never wanted to be the Cult Leader; he was also not willing to be involved in this power struggle. Hence he went as far as possible for fear that his brethren would find him. Thereupon he grew a long beard and disguised himself as an elderly scholar; wandering everywhere, free and unrestrained.

One particular day he saw someone at a bustling street in Dadou; he recognized that person as Madame Cult Leader's martial brother Cheng Kun. He could not help to be secretly shocked. By that time there was a rumor in the Wulin world that many skilled pugilists were murdered, and there was always this message written on the adjacent wall: 'The killer is Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation Cheng Kun'. He wanted to investigate this case, but also wanted to inquire the Yang Jiaozhu's whereabouts to Cheng Kun; thereupon he followed Cheng Kun from a safe distance.

He saw Cheng Kun enter a restaurant, where two older men were waiting; they were the Xuanming Elders. Fan Yao knew Cheng Kun's martial art level was high, so he sat on a rather far away table, drinking wine. He could only hear those three people talking indistinctly, but the words 'must destroy the Brightness Peak' were heard clearly. Hearing his cult was in danger Fan Yao could not ignore it; he followed those three secretly and saw them entering the Ruyang [a place in Henan] 'wang fu' [lit. king mansion - governmental palace]. Later he found out that those two Xuanming Elders were martial art experts under the employment of the Prince of Ruyang.

The Prince of Ruyang, Khakan Timur, was a very high ranking officer in charge of the military forces. He was brave and resourceful; in fact, he was the most capable person of the imperial household. He was the one who dispatched troops to suppress the rebellion of Jiang Huai [Jiangsu and Anhui]. It can be said that the victory and defeat of the imperial army was the sole responsibility of this prince Khakan Timur.

Zhang Wuji and the others had heard his name for quite some time, by now hearing that Lu Zhangke and the others were his subordinates, they more or less could guess, but in the end they were still surprised.

"Who, then, is this Miss Zhao?" Yang Xiao asked.

"Da Ge, there is no harm for you to take a guess," Fan Yao answered.

"Is it possible that she is Khakan Timur's daughter?" Yang Xiao said.

“Pretty good!” Fan Yao clapped his hands, “One guess and right on target. This Ruyang Wangye [Prince, lit. king master] has one son and one daughter. His son is Kuku Timur; his daughter is this girl. Her Mongolian name is Minmin Timur something. Kuku Timur is Ruyang Wangye’s crown prince; he will succeed his father as the future Prince Ruyang. The daughter’s title is Shao Min Jun Zhu [‘jun zhu’ means a ruler of some region, or a princess. Translator’s note: I don’t know how to translate this ‘Shao Min’ name; I guess we’ll leave it as is: a name.]. These two children are good in martial arts and they both have good level of skill. They love to dress as Han people and they speak Han language. They even adopted Han names; the boy chose Wang Baobao, while the girl chose Zhao Min. These two characters ‘Zhao Min’ came from her title, Shao Min Jun Zhu.”

Wei Yixiao smiled and said, “These brother and sister are very strange; one uses Wang as his surname, the other Zhao. From our Han people’s perspective, it is very funny.”

Fan Yao said, “Actually, their surname is Timur. Their given names are in the front; this is the custom of the barbarians. Ruyang Wangye Khakan Timur also has a Han’s surname; which is Li.” Speaking to this point the four of them burst out in laughter.

[Author’s note: In the New Yuan History, 220th chapter, on the biography of Khakan Timur: ‘Khakan Timur was the ancestor of Kuokuotai, Zunaimantai, Fualuwen. He made Henan his home and thus was known as Shenqiu people. Later he changed his surname to Li.’ Although officially Kuku Timur was his crown prince, in reality he was Khakan Timur’s sister’s son. This little detail is not distinguished clearly in the novel.]

[Translator's note: I apologize for not able to find any reference on the above note; hence my translation might be inaccurate.]

Yang Xiao said, "This Miss Zhao's appearance and lifestyle is just like Han people, but the way she handles affairs was so fierce and ruthless, revealing her true barbarian origin."

Until that moment Zhang Wuji did not know Zhao Min's origin. Although he guessed she must be from the royal household, he had never expected that she was actually the daughter of Prince Ruyang who was the commander of the Yuan Dynasty's military forces. He had fought with her several times and each time he was somewhat overpowered. Although her martial art skill was not as good as his, when it comes to quick-thinking and resourcefulness, he was not her match.

Fan Yao continued, "Subordinate continued listening secretly and found out that Prince Ruyang had made up his mind to exterminate Jianghu's martial art exponents ['men, pai, bang, hui' – gate, sect, clan and society]. He had accepted Cheng Kun's scheme, in which the first step was to eliminate our Cult. I considered it carefully; our Cult was involved in endless internal strife, while the enemy was so strong, our destruction was imminent. The only way to prevent this is by entering the palace, learning Prince Ruyang's plot, and act accordingly. Other than that I could not think of anything else. What I found to be strange was that Cheng Kun is not only Madame Yang Jiaozhu's martial brother, but he is also Xie Shi Wang's [Lion King Xie] master; why did he hate our Cult so much? I thought about it but could not come up with a good answer. I thought he must be seeking riches and honor so that by exterminating our Cult he would render a meritorious service to the kingdom. There are not too many Cult brethren who know Cheng Kun, but I have met him

once, so he knew me. To prevent my plan from leaking out, I have to kill this man.”

You should,” Wei Yixiao commented.

“But this man is so sly, also his martial art is strong,” Fan Yao continued, “I have tried to kill him secretly three times but to no avail. The third time I managed to stab him with a sword, but I was hacked by his palm. It was really not easy for me to escape. I did not reveal my identity, but I suffered a severe injury, which took me more than a year to recover. By this time the Ruyang Palace conspiracy has ripened. I thought if I disguise myself I might be able to conceal my identity for a while. In the past the number of Jianghu people who knew me and Yang Xiong [brother Yang] as the ‘Xiao Yao Two Immortals’ were truly not a few. Over longer period of time I will surely give myself away. Thereupon clenching my teeth I destroyed my own face and disguised myself as a Toutuo. I used some medicine to dye my hair, and went to the Watzu kingdom of the Western Region.”

“Watzu kingdom?” Wei Yixiao wondered, “It is tens of thousands ‘li’s away; why did you go there?”

Fan Yao smiled, but before he could answer Yang Xiao clapped his hands and said, “That’s a marvelous idea! Wei Xiong, Fan Xiongdi went to Watzu kingdom looking for a chance to show his skill, so that the Mongolian nobility would surely notice. Prince of Ruyang was looking for warriors from all over the world, so if the ruler of Watzu wanted to please the Prince, he would send him to the palace to offer his service. This way Fan Xiongdi became a warrior from the Watzu kingdom. His face was changed, also he did not open his mouth. Even if Cheng Kun had divine skill, there is no way he would have recognized him.”

Wei Yixiao heaved a deep sigh and said, “Yang Jiaozhu

placed the Xiao Yao Er Xian above the four 'Fa Wang' [Protector King]; his vision was truly as bright as a torch. This kind of scheming, some Eagle King, Bat King, will never think about."

"Wei Xiong, that's enough of praising," Fan Yao said, "Just like Yang Zuoshi said, in Watzu I killed some lions and slaughtered some tigers, making a name for myself; for their honor, the local king sent me to the Ruyang Palace. But that Cheng Kun was not in the palace; I didn't know where he went."

Immediately Yang Xiao narrated briefly the enmity between Cheng Kun and the Ming Cult; how he sneaked into the Brightness Peak to attack, and how Zhang Wuji thwarted his treacherous plan, and how in the end he fought with Yin Yewang and finally died.

As Fan Yao listened to this story he was silent for half a day; he did not realize that there were so many twist and turns in this affair. He stood up and bowed respectfully toward Zhang Wuji, "Jiaozhu," he said, "Subordinate would like to ask for your forgiveness."

"Fan Youshi, there is no need to be modest," Zhang Wuji replied.

Fan Yao said, "When subordinate entered the Ruyang Palace, in order to win the King's heart, during a disturbance in the market place subordinate has killed three of our own Cult's 'xiang zhu' [a position within the Ming Cult; I am not sure how to translate this term properly], giving the impression that there was a deep enmity between myself and the Ming Cult."

Zhang Wuji was silent, he thought, "Killing a Cult brother is

one of our Cult's five big prohibitions; that was the reason why although Yang Zuoshi, Four 'Fa Wang's, Five-Element Flags and the others fought fiercely over the Cult Leader position, they had never killed a fellow Cult brother. Fan Youshi's transgression is really not light, but his primary motivation was to protect our Cult and not because of personal grudge, so I really cannot judge him guilty." He said, "Fan Youshi has suffered so much in protecting our Cult, I can't really blame you."

Fan Yao bowed and said, "Thank you for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji silently thought, "A man as cruel as Fan Youshi is truly rare. He is capable of mutilating his own face with seventeen, eighteen cuts; then he killed several of our own Cult's innocent 'xiang zhu's, all without any guilty feeling. People calling the Ming Cult a heretical Devil Cult is not without reason. I wonder if, in the future, we can change this perverse and evil characteristic."

Although with his mouth Zhang Wuji said, 'I can't really blame you,' Fan Yao could see the unsatisfied look on his face. He held out his hand to draw Yang Xiao's sword, and with a swing of his left hand he cut off two of his right hand fingers.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he snatched the sword from Fan Yao's hand and said, "Fan Youshi, you ... you ... why did you do this?"

Fan Yao replied, "Killing our own innocent Cult brothers is a grave offense. Fan Yao still has an unfinished important matter, so I can't kill myself yet. I cut my two fingers first then later on I'll cut my own head."

Zhang Wuji said, "I have already forgiven Fan Youshi's

mistake, why bother doing this? We should be more concerned over the important matter. Fan Youshi, don't raise this matter anymore." He quickly took out some cut wound medicine and applied it to his wound; he also tore up his own clothes and wrapped Fan Youshi's wound. He knew in his heart that this man was hard-hearted; although Zhang Wuji said he did not hold him accountable, he could see any sign in Fan Youshi's face that he would take Zhang Wuji's words by heart. He was capable of doing what he said, so there was a great possibility he would commit suicide in the future for his own crime. Zhang Wuji remembered how he had suffered this much for the sake of the Cult, his heart was moved. Suddenly he knelt down and said, "Fan Youshi, you have rendered a great service to the Cult; please accept my respect. If you harm yourself, that means you are saying to me that I am neither competent nor worthy to hold the Jiaozhu position. You stab yourself with a sword, I will stab myself twice. I am young and my knowledge is shallow; I don't understand much of our affair, I can't distinguish good from evil."

As they saw their Jiaozhu kneel down, Fan Yao, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao quickly knelt down on the ground. With tears in his eyes Yang Xiao said, "Fan Xiongdi, please rest your case. Our Cult's prosperity and decline are in the hands of our Jiaozhu only. Jiaozhu has given you an order, you surely must not disobey it."

Fan Yao saluted and said, "Today subordinate has tested his sword and palm skill against Jiaozhu's, and I fell on my knees in full admiration. Ku Toutuo's personality is eccentric and unreasonable, I am asking for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji held out his hands to stand him up. From that day forward a strong bond had formed between the two; no more misunderstandings happened.

Fan Yao continued his narration on what happened after he entered the Ruyang Palace. The Ruyang Prince, Khakan Timur, was very capable in commanding the military force. Unfortunately for him the royal government was dominated by corrupt ministers, plus the current emperor was a muddle-head, so chaos and confusion reigned everywhere in the kingdom; insurrections arose everywhere, forcing the Ruyang Prince to dispatch troop's expeditions to east and to the west, crushing innumerable rebellions. These insurrections had kept the Ruyang Prince busy for years and his plan of annihilating the Jianghu's sects, schools and clans was put on hold for the time being.

Several years passed; his children grew up. While his son Kuku Timur followed his steps commanding the troops, his daughter Minmin Timur gathered Mongolian warriors under her command, Western Region's warriors and foreign monks, to carry out a large scale attack against the sects, schools and clans. Cheng Kun secretly helped her engineer the plan; taking advantage of the six major sects' besiege of the Brightness Peak, Zhao Min sent a large quantities of her martial art masters in an attempt to extinguish the Ming Cult and the six major sects all at once.

The Green Willow Manor affairs and the subsequent events were part of this grand scheme. At that time Fan Yao's assignment was to protect the Ruyang Prince, hence he did not participate in the attack to the western region and he did not learn about the attack until much later. Fan Yao said that although he did not raise any suspicion in the Ruyang Palace, Zhao Min would not allow him to participate in the attack to the western region since he came from the western region. Perhaps it was also part of Cheng Kun's idea.

Zhao Min used the poison 'shi xiang ruan jin san' [ten-

fragrance muscle softener powder], offered by the foreign western region monk, to drug the masters of the six major sects who were just returning from the Brightness Peak, by poisoning their food. This poison had no color and no smell, so once it was mixed in the dishes, who could detect it? Once the drug worked, the muscles and bones in one's whole body would be weakened for a few days. Although they were able to move around as usual, they could not exert the least bit of internal energy; for that reason all the six major sects' masters who were involved in the Brightness Peak expedition were captured one by one within just one short month. It was when they tried to drug the third group Shaolin monks under Kong Xing's command that they were detected. A fierce battle followed, Kong Xing died under Ah San's hand; about a dozen or so others died under the hands of Xuanming Elders, Shen Jian Ba Xiong [Eight Divine Archers], as well as Ah Da, Ah Er, Ah San and the others. The rest were captured.

The next step was to raid the six major sects' bases; the first being the Shaolin Sect. The Shaolin Temple was heavily guarded, so it was not easy to mix the poison into their food. It was completely different from drugging the monks when they were spending the night in the inn while traveling. Therefore, they had to resort to different method. "'Jun zhu' [princess] was afraid their strength was not sufficient to fight the Shaolin Temple head-on, so they called for reinforcement from Dadou, which happened to be under my command. We arrived right on time to help capturing the Shaolin monks. Shaolin Sect is always rude to our Cult; so I was glad they undergo a little bit of suffering. Even if I have to kill several stinky monks, Ku Toutuo won't crease my brows. Jiaozhu, I believe you'll agree with me, ha ... ha ...!"

"Xiong di [brother]," Yang Xiao interrupted, "Were you the one who turned those Luohan statues around?"

Fan Yao said with a smile, "I saw 'Jun zhu' ordered her people to carve those sixteen characters on the back of the Luo Han statues; her intention was to shift the blame to our Cult. Later on I came back quietly and turned those statues back. Dage [big brother], you are very observant, you managed to find out about this matter. At that time did you guess it was 'Xiong di'?"

Yang Xiao said, "At that time we only know that there was a master helping our Cult in secret; how would I know that it was my old partner, good brother?" Four people broke up in laughter. Immediately Yang Xiao told Fan Yao briefly that the Ming Cult had ceased all enmity with the six major sects and joined hands to fight the Mongols together; for that reason they must rescue all the masters.

Fan Yao said, "The enemy is numerous, we are only four people; it will be difficult for us to accomplish this. The best way would be to get the antidote for 'shi xiang ruan jin san' and feed it to those stinky monks, stinky nuns and all those ox-noses; after their internal strength is recovered then we can make a surprised attack to those Tartars and then we can escape Dadou together."

The Ming Cult had never had any good relationship with Shaolin, Wudang and other orthodox sects, so in his speech Fan Yao did not have the slightest respect toward these six major sects. Yang Xiao tried to cast him some meaningful glances, but Fan Yao was oblivious to him. But actually Zhang Wuji did not mind at all; he clapped his hands and said, "That's great, Fan Youshi; but then how are we going to get the antidote for the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'?"

Fan Yao said, "Although 'Jun zhu' pays me a lot of respect, she has never discussed any important matter with me

because I've never opened my mouth. When she talked and the other person did not utter a single word, how could she not be disappointed? Moreover, I came from a small country in the western region, so she could not treat me as a trusted friend. Hence I don't know where the antidote for the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' is. But I do know that this matter is very important to her, so she would guard this secret carefully. If my guess is correct, the poison and the antidote are in the hands of the Xuanming Elders; one has the poison, the other has the antidote, and they swap those poison and antidote periodically."

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This princess is so cunning that even a man might not necessarily be better than her. Doesn't she trust the Xuanming Elders?"

Fan Yao replied, "First, distrust is right; second, it is also safer this way. Take us, for example, we want to steal the antidote; but we don't know whether it is in Lu Zhangke's hand, or is it in He Biweng's hand? Moreover, I heard that between the poison and the antidote there is no distinct color or odor differences, so unless we are really familiar with it, we might end up stealing the poison when we want to steal the antidote. This 'shi xiang ruan jin san' also has another fierce characteristic; when one took the poison, one's muscles and bones would be weakened, but one's life would not be threatened in any way. However, if that same person took the poison for the second time, even only for a little bit, immediately his blood flow will reverse and there is no cure for it."

Wei Yixiao stuck out his tongue and said, "If that's so, then we must not steal the wrong antidote."

"That's true," Fan Yao said, "But I have an idea: we steal both the poison and the antidote from the Xuanming Elders

then we give it to some low level master from Huashan or Kongtong Sect. If he dies, then that one is the poison. Don't you think it is a good idea?"

Zhang Wuji realized he still had some heretical nature and did not put too much thought about other people's life. He laughed, "That's not good," he said, "What if after we painstakingly steal them, they are both poison?"

Yang Xiao slapped his thigh, "Jiaozhu is right," he said, "Last night we made such a commotion that perhaps 'Jun zhu' is scared and keep the antidote herself. I think we'd better investigate carefully who has the antidote then we'll talk about how to get it from him." He paused for a moment and then said, "Xiong di, what do those two Xuanming Elders like most?"

Fan Yao smiled and said, "Lu loves pretty face, He loves wine; what else do they like?"

"Jiaozhu," Yang Xiao asked Zhang Wuji, "Is there any drug that can make someone physically weak like the effect of the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'?"

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and smiled, "To make someone weak and drowsy is certainly not difficult; only if you give it to a martial art expert, he would recover in less than an hour. To make something as fierce as the 'shi xiang ruan jin san', that I cannot do."

Yang Xiao smiled, "About an hour is enough," he said, "Subordinate has an idea, but I don't know whether it will work. I am asking Jiaozhu to give me your opinion. Although I said it is an idea, it might be just a worthless thought. Fan Xiongdi, you invite He Biweng to drink some wine; put the poison Jiaozhu make into it. Then Fan Xiongdi make up some

trouble, pretend that he is being poisoned by He Biweng with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; at that time we will find out who has the antidote. Then we can steal it and use it to rescue the others."

Zhang Wuji said, "This idea is feasible; only it depends on He Biweng's temperament. Fan Youshi, what do you think?"

Fan Yao contemplated this idea back and forth and thought that although this idea was simple, it was flawless; so he said, "I think Yang Dage's idea is feasible. That He Biweng is temperamental, but he is not as smart as Lu Zhangke. If the antidote is in his hand, I think I can still deal with him even though my martial art skill is inferior to him."

"What if the antidote is in Lu Zhangke's hand?" Yang Xiao asked.

Fan Yao knitted his brows and said, "Then it is a lot more complicated." He stood up and paced back and forth on that little hill. After a long time he clapped his hands and said, "I have a way; that Lu Zhangke is smarter than average men, if we try to trick him, he might see through our deception. We must get hold of his weakness and then blackmail him; of course he will consider the pros and the cons, but he will never realize our scheme. I know that this idea is risky; we might fail, but other than this I can't think of anything else."

"What kind of weakness does this old man have?" Yang Xiao asked, "He is an old man with a young heart; what weakness of his fall into Xiongdi's hand?"

"In the spring this year Ruyang Wangye took a concubine and he invited some of us to an informal dinner in his residence," Fan Yao said, "Wangye proudly talked about his beautiful concubine; he even ordered the new bride to come

out and serve us wine. I saw Lu Zhangke's lecherous eyes almost popped out of their sockets, while he swallowed his saliva; his heart was indeed burning with desire."

"Then what happened?" Wei Yixiao asked.

"Nothing," Fan Yao replied, "She is Wangye's beloved concubine; although he has guts as high as the sky he would not dare to indulge his wicked thought."

"Lecherous eyes can't be called some secret you can blackmail him with," Wei Yixiao said.

"I can't blackmail him over that matter," Fan Yao said, "But I am going to bother Wei Xiong [brother Wei]; with your 'qing gong' [lightness skill] you can go and steal Ruyang Wangye's beloved concubine and place her on Lu Zhangke's bed. I am 70, 80% sure that this old lecher won't be able to hold his desire forever. Even if he really is able to rein his horse before falling off the cliff, I will rush in. Although he has a hundred mouths he won't be able to wash himself clean, so he will be forced to hand the antidote over to me nicely."

Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao laughed and clapped their hands, "This is a very nice ploy. Although he is as smart as the Devil, he will be framed for sure."

Zhang Wuji was annoyed and amused at the same time, thinking that he was the leader of this heretical and unorthodox bunch. But although their conduct was sly and no different than Zhao Min and her people; they were doing it for a good cause, not an evil one. So in a way it was completely different from Zhao Min. It could be said that they were using poison to combat poison. Having this thought he relaxed a little bit; smiling he said, "It's a pity

Ruyang Wangye's concubine's honor will be ruined."

Fan Yao replied with a smile, "I will rush into the room as soon as possible, so Lu Zhangke won't have a chance to molest her."

Immediately four people sat down to discuss their plan in detail; after acquiring the antidote, Fan Yao was to rush to the pagoda and distribute it to masters of Shaolin, Wudang, and the other sects. Zhang Wuji and Wei Yixiao would wait outside the temple. As soon as Fan Yao set off fire in the Wan An Temple, they would set the common people's homes around the temple on fire, so that the group of warriors could take advantage of this confusion to escape. Yang Xiao would buy some horses and prepare some carriages and wait outside the western city gate; the warriors would then use these horses and carriages to separately escape from the city, and to finally rendezvous at Changping.

Zhang Wuji objected to the idea of burning common people's homes; he would rather not to implicate the innocents. But Yang Xiao said, "Jiaozhu, the affair of this world is oftentimes difficult to predict. We are saving the warriors of the six major sects so that someday we will drive the Tartars away; that would certainly benefit millions of common people. Today we are forced to harm hundreds of homes, this is because we don't have any other alternative."

Once the plan was decided four people went back to the city separately to attend to their individual business. Yang Xiao went to buy some horses and hired some carriages. Zhang Wuji bought the ingredients and concocted some drugs. To conceal the taste, he added three types of spices so when it was mixed with the wine, it would produce a sweet smelling fragrance. Wei Yixiao went to the market and bought a big cloth sack. When the sky turned dark he went to the Ruyang

Palace and kidnapped the Prince's concubine.

Fan Yao and Xuanming Elders, along with other martial art experts, lived nearby the Wan An Temple complex to guard the major sects warriors. Zhao Min still lived at the palace; only on the evenings she wanted to learn martial art did she ride a carriage to go to the temple. Fan Yao took the drug back to the temple with a happy and grateful heart. He remembered how over the last twenty years or so the Ming Cult was in disunity, but today a new hope emerged; his many sufferings over the years were not in vain. Zhang Wuji was not only a martial art expert, but his heart was righteous as well, so others can easily put their trust in him. The only problem was that Zhang Wuji was not cruel and merciless enough; he was somewhat weak and fussy, otherwise he would be a perfect leader.

Fan Yao lived in the west building, while the Xuanming Elders stayed at the 'bao xiang jing she' [the most refined precious fragrance hall] of the rear courtyard. Normally he did not hang around those two elders too much for fear that they might be able to look through his disguise; that was the reason he chose a room far away from them. Now he had to invite He Biweng to drink wine, he did not have any idea how to do it. Casting his glance to the rear courtyard he saw the sun was setting in the sky; already the sun could not reach the lower half of the 13-level pagoda, while the light reflected from the glazed tiles on top of the pagoda were also gradually turning pale. He still did not know what to do. Slowly pacing back and forth along the rear courtyard with his hands behind his back, he suddenly caught a sweet fragrance of meat from the small building opposite the 'bao xiang jing she'; it was the building where Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui of the Eight Divine Archers lived.

Fan Yao's heart was stirred; he walked toward that building,

shoved the door open, and the strong meat smell greeted his nostrils. He saw Li Sicui was squatting on the floor, busily fanning the fire in a small brick stove, on which was a big earthenware pot. The fire was blazing hot; the strong smell of meat came out of that pot. Sun Sanhui was setting the bowls and chopsticks on the table. Obviously these two were about to have their dinner.

They were slightly startled as they saw Ku Toutuo push the door and come in; upon seeing his stern face they groaned inwardly. They had just killed a big yellow dog on the street; cut its limbs and quietly cooked the dog inside their room. Wan An Temple was a Buddhist temple, so cooking meat in the temple was a great trespass. If it was other people they might still get away from it, but Ku Toutuo was a Buddhist monk. If he was angered he might beat them up. Ku Toutuo's martial art skill was very high, these two people certainly were not his match; moreover, they were the ones who committed the crime, so if they were beaten, they got what they deserved. Thinking of this they were scared; but then they saw him walking to the stove, opened the lid, took a look and drew a deep breath, seemingly to say, 'Smells good, smells good!' Suddenly they saw him putting his hand into the pot, seemingly oblivious to the boiling soup, to fish out a slice of dog meat. Opening his mouth wide he put the meat entirely in his mouth; chewing it for a while and swallowed it. Then he licked his lips as if he was tremendously enjoying the meat.

Sun and Li two people were delighted, they busily said, "Ku Dashi [Reverend Ku], please sit down, please sit down! We didn't know you like to eat dog meat."

But Ku Toutuo did not want to take a seat; he squatted in front of the stove and picked another piece of dog meat and chewed it right there. Sun Sanhui wanted to win his heart,

so he presented a bowl of wine to him. Ku Toutuo took the bowl and drank a mouthful, but suddenly he spat it back out to the ground. He waved his left hand in front of his nose, as if he was saying that the wine was of inferior quality and not good to drink; and then he left the room in big strides.

Sun and Li two people were anxious to see him going out of the room, seemingly angry. But not too long afterwards they saw him back with a big wine gourd in his hand. "Right! Right!" they exclaimed delightfully, "Our wine is a low quality one; Ku Dashi has a good quality wine, nothing can be better than that!" They busily arranged the stool and the bowl, inviting Ku Toutuo to sit on the head of the table; they took a bowl full of dog meat and served it in front of him. Ku Toutuo's martial art skill was very high; among Zhao Min's subordinates he could be ranked near the top. Under normal circumstances the Eight Divine Archers would not curry favor with anybody, but today they had an opportunity to invite him eating dog meat, perhaps if his heart was happy he would impart to them one or two special skills, then they would reap the benefit for the rest of their lives.

Ku Toutuo pulled out the gourd's cork and poured three bowls full of wine. The wine was golden yellow in color and it was rather thick like diluted honey; as soon as it was poured, a sweet aroma greeted their nostrils. Sun and Li two people cheered, "Good wine! Good wine!"

Fan Yao silently mused, "I wonder if the Xuanming Elders are home; if they are out and not back yet, then what I am doing right now is useless." He took the wine bowl and held it above the pot on the stove; while the dog meat was boiling, the steam rose up and warmed up the wine, making the wine aroma stronger.

Sun and Li two people were drooling over the wine; they

were going to drink the wine cold, but Ku Toutuo signaled them not to do that, he told them to warm the wine before drinking it. Three people took turn warming their wine over the boiling soup; the aroma spread out everywhere. If He Biweng was not in the temple complex, then that was the end of it. Otherwise if he was around the courtyard would be impossible for him not to smell the wine and come over. And sure enough, the door of the 'bao xiang jing she' across the street opened up and He Biweng was shouting, "Good wine, good wine! Hey, hey!"

He was not shy; so he crossed the courtyard toward their door, he pushed it open and walked in. He was startled to see Ku Toutuo along with Sun and Li two people gathered around the stove, drinking wine and eat the dog meat, with the soup dripping everywhere. He Biweng laughed and said, "Ku Dashi, I didn't know you like eating and drinking too; we have the same taste."

Sun and Li two people busily stood up and said, "He Gong-gong [grandfather, respectful term toward someone older], quickly drink some wine, this is Ku Dashi's good wine, not everybody can drink it."

He Biweng sat opposite Ku Toutuo, it was as if they were having an eating and drinking competition; Sun and Li two people ended up became their servants, busily serving them meat and pouring them wine. Four people were all in high spirits, they ate and drank for half a day and were 60, 70% drunk. "Now I can make my move," Fan Yao thought.

After pouring wine on his own bowl until it was full, he laid the wine gourd horizontally on the table. Turned out his wine gourd's cork was hollow. He put the powder made by Zhang Wuji inside the cavity and wrapped the cork with two pieces of cloth. When the wine gourd stood upright, the powder did

not fall down, so what the four of them drank was ordinary good wine. But once the wine gourd was laid on its side, the wine would wet the cloth and diluted the powder, so now the wine became poisonous. The bottom of the wine gourd was round, so it did not matter whether it was standing upright or lying down on its side; besides, they had been drinking for a good long while, so nobody paid any attention. They were drunk and felt entirely carefree.

After He Biweng drank the bowl in front of him, Fan Yao pulled the cork and handed the gourd over to him. He Biweng poured a bowlful of wine for himself, and then he also poured some wine in Sun and Li's bowls. Because Ku Toutuo's bowl was still full, he did not pour any wine for him. Four people lifted the bowl to their mouth and 'glug, glug' they emptied their bowls. Other than Fan Yao, the three of them had drunk the poisoned wine.

Sun and Li two people's internal strength was not too deep; once the drug entered their system they immediately felt their limbs weaken and their bodies get sick. In a low voice Sun Sanhui said, "Si di [fourth brother], there is something wrong with my tummy."

"I ... I ... I think I am poisoned," Li Sicui also said. By this time He Biweng also felt something was wrong; he tried to circulate his internal strength, but failed. His expression changed drastically.

Fan Yao stood up; his face was full of anger, he grabbed He Biweng's collar and grunted some 'Heh, heh' noise, but did not say anything. Sun Sanhui was scared, "Ku Dashi, what is it?" he said. Fan Yao dipped his finger in the wine and wrote 'shi xiang ruan jin san' five characters on the table. Sun and Li two people knew that the Xuanming Elders were in charge of this poison, and so it seemed Ku Toutuo and the two of

them were being poisoned with this drug. They looked at each other and knelt down in front of He Biweng, "He Gong-gong," they pleaded, "We two brothers do not dare to offend you, Senior; please don't punish us too severely." Both of them thought that He Biweng was trying to attack Ku Toutuo, and they happened to be there, so they suffered as innocent bystanders; if He Biweng meant to harm them, he did not need to use any poison.

He Biweng was also greatly shocked; this month it was indeed his turn to be in charge of the 'shi xiang ruan jin san', which he hid inside his left crane-beak pen. This pair of weapons had never left his body even for a single step, so it would be impossible for anybody to steal it without his knowledge. But as luck would have it, he could not exert the least bit of internal energy, so without a doubt he must have been poisoned with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'. Actually, although the drug Zhang Wuji made was also potent, but it was greatly inferior to the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; the effect felt by the victim was not the same. But He Biweng only knew that the victim of 'shi xiang ruan jin san' would lose their ability to exert their internal energy, he had never taken the poison personally; therefore, although the difference was great, he was not able to distinguish between the two.

He saw Ku Toutuo look flustered and angry, while Sun and Li two people did not stop imploring him to have mercy; his doubt was gone, he said, "Ku Dashi, please don't be angry; we are brothers here, how could I have an ill intention to harm you? I am also poisoned; I feel weak all over my body. I don't know who is playing dirty trick on us. It's really strange."

Fan Yao dipped his finger in the wine again and wrote on the table, 'Quickly give us the antidote.'

He Biweng nodded and said, "That's right, we must take the antidote first, then we'll find and deal with the traitor who played this trick on us. But the antidote is in Lu Shige's [martial (older) brother] hand. Ku Dashi, please come with me."

Fan Yao was secretly delighted; he did not expect Yang Xiao's plan worked flawlessly, without too much trouble he found out where the antidote was. Holding up his left hand he grabbed He Biweng's wrist, deliberately making his steps falter. They crossed the courtyard together, walking toward the 'bao xiang jing she'.

He Biweng was secretly happy to see Fan Yao staggering, he thought, "This Ku Toutuo's martial art is supposedly very high, but he has never contended against us, two brothers. Looking at his flustered condition after being poisoned, it seems like his internal strength is way below ours."

Two people walked over the hall's gate. He Biweng's room was against the south wall, while Lu Zhangke lived in the room against the north wall. The door of the northern room was tightly closed. "Shige," He Biweng called out, "Are you home?"

Lu Zhangke answered from inside the room. He Biweng stretched out his hand to push the door open, but it was bolted. "Shige, hurry up and open the door," he called out, "This is important."

"What's so important?" Lu Zhangke asked, "I am busy training my martial art. Can you not disturb me?"

He Biweng and Lu Zhangke's martial arts came from the same school, their skill levels were almost equal. But first of

all Lu Zhangke entered their school earlier, secondly he was smarter, hence He Biweng had always been respectful to him. Hearing his annoyed tone, He Biweng did not dare to call again.

Fan Yao, on the other hand, could not wait any longer; if the drug's effect disappeared, his scheme would be exposed. Therefore, disregarding everything he pushed the door with his right shoulder, breaking the bolt and the door flew open. A shrill cry of female voice was heard. Lu Zhangke was standing in front of the bed; hearing the sound of the broken door he turned his head immediately. His expression was that of startling and embarrassment. Fan Yao saw lying on the bed was a woman, her body was wrapped inside a sheet of blanket, her head was the only part exposed, the blanket was tied up with a string of rope, just like a bedding roll. The woman's long hair spread outside the blanket, her face was white and beautiful. Fan Yao recognized her as the Ruyang Prince's new beloved concubine, Han Shi [lit. a maiden with surname of Han]; he said in his heart, "Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei] is really good. He managed to enter the palace alone to kidnap Concubine Han and bring her over here."

Actually, although the Ruyang Palace was tightly guarded, but the warriors only concentrated on guarding the Prince, the Crown Prince and the Princess [original: Wangye (lit. master king), Shi zi (a royal son), and Jun zhu (princess)] three people; nobody had ever thought of someone kidnapping one of the numerous concubines around the palace. Besides, Wei Yi Xiao moved like lightning, he was quick and agile exceptionally; as soon as he entered the Palace he stealthily kidnapped Concubine Han and brought her out. It was actually a lot more difficult for him to enter Lu Zhangke's room. He waited for half a day before finally Lu Zhangke left his room to go to the bathroom. Like a ghost he sneaked in and put Concubine Han on the bed, and just as quick he left the room.

When Lu Zhangke returned he saw a woman was lying on his bed. He jumped out his room immediately; looking to four directions he did not see anybody, Wei Yixiao was already far away, other than some noise of eating and drinking from Sun and Li two people's room, he saw nothing unusual. Lu Zhangke felt strange, but maintaining his composure he returned to his room. When he looked at the woman, he was dumbstruck. That day when the Prince took a new concubine and invited his top-tier warriors for an informal dinner in his palace, Concubine Han served the wine. She was graceful and full of smiles. Although Lu Zhangke was not young anymore, he was unable to restrain his soul to be stolen by her. He was a lecherous man and all his life he had devastated countless women of respectable families. That day when he saw Concubine Han's beauty he sighed and regretted that he did not meet this kind of beautiful woman earlier. If he had seen her before she was taken by the Prince, he was certain she would not escape from his hand. He had oftentimes remembered her for many days to come; but afterwards he found a new lover and Concubine Han slowly faded from his memory.

To his complete surprise right at this moment Concubine Han was on his bed, as if she was dropped from heaven. He was pleasantly surprised. Thinking for a moment he guessed it must be his oldest disciple Wuwang Apu who knew his deepest desire and had secretly took Concubine Han away for him.

Lu Zhangke saw she was wrapped inside a blanket, the exposed skin of her neck was as white as snow. Faintly he could see her obviously naked shoulder, as if she was not wearing any clothes inside the blanket; his heart was thumping wildly with excitement. He quietly asked her how she came to this place; but after asking her several times,

Concubine Han still did not give him any answer. Finally Lu Zhangke guessed her acupoint must be sealed. He was about to reach out and unseal her acupoint when He Biweng and the others arrived at his door and then Ku Toutuo shoved the door open. It was an unexpected change and Lu Zhangke was in an extremely awkward situation. He meant to cover her up, but it was already too late. Now he thought that perhaps the Prince had discovered that his concubine was kidnapped and sent Ku Toutuo to arrest him. Things had come thus far, he had no choice but trying to escape. 'Shua!' his right hand unsheathed his deer antler staff, while his left hand grabbed Concubine Han with the intention of rushing out through the window.

"Shige," He Biweng was startled, "Quickly give me the antidote."

"What?" Lu Zhangke asked.

He Biweng answered, "I don't now how, but Xiao Di [little brother] and Ku Dashi are poisoned with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'."

"What did you say?" Lu Zhangke asked again, and He Biweng repeated what he said. "Isn't the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' in your hand?" Lu Zhangke was confused.

"Xiao Di is also baffled," He Biweng said, "We, four people, were merrily eating and drinking, and suddenly we were all poisoned. Lu Shige, quickly take the antidote and give it to us."

Listening to this part Lu Zhangke's fear subsided. He returned Concubine Han to the bed, making sure that her head was facing inside. He Biweng knew his martial brother's lecherous nature, so seeing a woman inside his

room was not surprising at all. Moreover, He Biweng was so frightened of being poisoned that he did not pay any attention to what the woman looked like. Besides, he would not recognize her anyway. That day during the banquet at the Palace, when Concubine Han came out to serve the wine, she retreated right after greeting the guests. He Biweng only had his eyes on the wine; why would he care if that woman wearing pearl bracelet and jade necklace was beautiful or ugly?

Lu Zhangke said, “Ku Dashi, please come in and take a rest with He Xiong Di [brother He] here, I’ll go to get the antidote.” While speaking, he gently pushed them to lead them inside. Because of this, He Biweng faltered and nearly fell down. Fan Yao also staggered, pretending that his internal strength was gone. But his internal strength was actually very deep, so as soon as there was an external force, his internal strength reacted naturally. As Lu Zhangke pushed, he immediately knew his Shidi [martial (younger) brother] really lost his internal strength, while Ku Toutuo was only pretending.

Lu Zhangke was afraid he was mistaken, so he pushed them one more time. He Biweng and Ku Toutuo fell back together outside, but Lu Zhangke felt while one was devoid of strength, the other was stable and solid. Lu Zhangke maintained his composure; he smiled and said, “Ku Dashi, I am sorry.” While saying that he held out his hand as if he was going to help Ku Toutuo stand up, but actually he was going to grab the ‘hui zong’ [gathering ancestor] and ‘wai guan’ [outside passage] acupoints on Ku Toutuo’s wrist.

Fan Yao understood his intention and knew that his scheme was exposed. With a wave of his left hand he heavily hit the ‘hun men xue’ [soul gate acupoint] on He Biweng’s back, rendering him paralyzed for the next three quarters of an

hour. Fan Yao understood that he had to fight a martial art master; but he was not afraid of Lu Zhangke if it was a one-to-one fight. “Hey, hey,” he sneered and said, “Are you bored of your life? How dare you kidnap wangye’s beloved concubine?”

As he opened his mouth to speak, the Xuanming Elders were shocked. They had known Ku Toutuo for fifteen, sixteen years, yet they had never heard him say even a single word. For all they know, Ku Toutuo was mute since his birth. Although Lu Zhangke knew Ku Toutuo did not have good intentions towards him, he had never suspected this man to be able to speak. Come to think about it, Ku Toutuo had deliberately planned this deception, then without a doubt he meant to place Lu Zhangke in a more dangerous situation. He immediately said, “Turned out Ku Dashi is not mute at all. You have been concealing the truth for more than a dozen years; what is your intention?”

Fan Yao said, “Wangye knew your heart is not right, he ordered me to pretend to be mute and stay near you to keep watch over you.” There were actually many flaws in his argument, but the fact was Concubine Han was on Lu Zhangke’s bed, so even if he did not have any ill intention, it was hard for Lu Zhangke not to believe. Besides, he knew very well how the Ruyang Prince treated the masters under his command.

As Fan Yao said those words, Lu Zhangke felt his knees weakened. “Wangye ordered you to arrest me?” he said, “Hey, hey, although you are the Ku Dashi, master of martial art, you might not necessarily able to capture me, Lu Zhangke.” While saying that he raised his deer staff, ready to fight.

Fan Yao laughed a little bit and said, “Mr. Lu, although Ku

Toutuo's martial art skill is not superior to yours, but the difference is not much. If you want to defeat me, I am afraid you won't accomplish that within one or two thousand moves. It's not difficult for you to have three moves or two stances advantage over me, but if you are thinking of taking Concubine Han along and saving your martial brother, I don't think you, Lu Zhangke, have this kind of ability."

Lu Zhangke shot a look at his martial brother; he knew Ku Toutuo was not speaking an empty threat. His martial brother and he had been studying martial art together since their childhood all the way until they were both old, they had never been separated for even a day. Both did not have wife or children, all they had was each other; hence it would be very hard for him to escape alone and abandon his martial brother.

Fan Yao understood his heart was moved, he called out to Sun and Li two people, telling them to enter the room and then he said, "Mr. Lu, nobody knew about this matter yet. Ku Toutuo is willing to protect you."

Lu Zhangke was surprised; "Protect me?" he asked, "How?"

Without answering Fan Yao turned around and sealed Sun and Li two people's mute and paralyze acupoints; his movement was swift and accurate, forcing Lu Zhangke to silently sigh in admiration. Ku Toutuo said, "Certainly you won't tell anybody yourself, your Shidi won't intentionally make things difficult for you. Ku Toutuo was mute, and he will stay mute, can't speak a word. About these two brothers, Ku Toutuo can seal their death acupoints to close their mouths for good. I don't think that's a problem."

Sun and Li two people were greatly shocked; they both thought that they had nothing to do with this matter, they

were just having fun eating dog meat and drinking wine, yet it led them to this kind of big disaster. They wanted to implore, asking for mercy, but unfortunately they could not open their mouths.

Fan Yao pointed his finger to Concubine Han, "As for this concubine, the Old Monk has two ideas: the first is we wash our hands clean; take her along with Sun and Li two people to a deserted place and kill them with a blade. We'll report to Wangye that she and Li Sicui, this handsome little thief, are having an affair and are running away together. Ku Toutuo found out about them and in his anger he killed both of them on the spot. We can spare Sun Sanhui's life. The second idea is you take her away and hide her well. Whether later this matter leaks out or not, it will depend on your own ability."

Lu Zhangke could not help from turning his head to look at Concubine Han; he saw on her eyes she was pleading him to take the second idea. Seeing her natural beauty Lu Zhangke felt that it would be a great pity if she were to be killed by a sword; his heart was greatly moved. "Thank you so much for standing up for me," he said, "But since you are so thoughtful, there must be something you want from me. What is it?" He knew perfectly well Ku Toutuo would not help him without any compensation.

"It is an extremely easy matter," Fan Yao replied, "I have a deep friendship with the Sect Leader of Emei Sect Miejue Shitai. That young miss surnamed Zhou is the result of my relationship with that old nun. I am asking you to give me the antidote so that I can rescue these two people. I will take full responsibility in front of Junzhu. If in anyway I implicate you, let the family of Ku Toutuo and the Old Nun Miejue, the males become thieves and the females become prostitutes, let us die a violent death without any opportunity to

reincarnate forever.”

He thought that because of Lu Zhangke’s romantic nature, it would be easier to win his heart if Fan Yao raised the affair between a man and a woman. He also recalled Yang Xiao’s story about how many of his fellow Ming Cult brethrens had died under Miejue Shitai’s sword; hence he fabricated a fake story about a monk and a nun secret relationship. He was a heretical man to begin with, so his speech and conduct were not those of a gentleman. He did not mean it with his heart when he made a heavy oath of ‘the males become thieves and the females become prostitutes’ kind of punishment.

As Lu Zhangke listened, he broke into smile, as he thought that this old Toutuo was no different than he was; in order to save his old lover and his daughter he was willing to ask favor from other people. Although it was a risky venture , it was all worth it for the sake of a beautiful woman. As Ku Toutuo asked him a favor, Lu Zhangke felt relieved. He laughed and said, “So then kidnapping Wangye’s beloved concubine and brought her here is also Ku Dashi’s handiwork?”

Fan Yao replied, “This is an important matter, how can I request with an empty hand? Consider it my payment.”

Lu Zhangke was delighted, only he was afraid there was somebody outside, so he did not dare to laugh out loud. But suddenly he remembered something, “Then how could my Shidi got poisoned with the ‘shi xiang ruan jin san’? Where did it come from?” he asked.

“Isn’t that easy?” Fan Yao replied, “The poison is in your Shidi’s hand, and he is a drunkard. Once he drank a lot of wine, can’t Ku Toutuo steal it from him?”

“Very well!” all Lu Zhangke’s doubts were gone, he said, “Ku Dashi, let Xiongdi [brother] become friends with you. I will not sell you, I hope you won’t play such a dirty trick on me again.”

Fan Yao pointed at Concubine Han and smiled, “Next time if you have a dirty trick as beautiful as this, I am asking Mr. Lu to set up a trap, let Ku Toutuo enter it. The Old Monk will happily fall into it.”

Two people laughed together, but each one actually had his own thought. Lu Zhangke secretly calculated how to kill this evil Toutuo after this current trouble had passed. Fan Yao knew that although Lu Zhangke submitted to his wish right now, but what kind of people were the Xuanming Elders that they were willing to let this kind of defeat go unavenged? As soon as Lu Zhangke hid Concubine Han and unsealed He Biweng’s acupoint, he would look for him to settle the debt. But at that time the masters of the six major sects would have been rescued and Fan Yao would shake the dust from his buttocks and walked away.

Seeing Lu Zhangke was slow in taking out the antidote, Fan Yao thought that if he urged, then Lu Zhangke might deliberately make things difficult, so he sat down and said with a laugh, “Why don’t Lu Xiong unseal Concubine Han’s acupoint? Then we all can drink several cups together. Looking at beautiful face under the bright lamp light is a rare lucky occasion that you won’t necessarily experience it once in a lifetime.”

Lu Zhangke knew that there were a lot of people in the Wan An Temple complex; the longer Concubine Han stayed in his room, the more dangerous their situation would be. Therefore, immediately he took the deer antler staff and turned one of the antlers open. He took a cup and pour some

powder into it while saying, “Ku Dashi, Xiongdi concede defeat to your divine strategy; please take this antidote.”

Fan Yao shook his head, “Such a little antidote, what can I do with that?”

Lu Zhangke said, “Not to mention two people, this powder is enough to rescue six, seven people.”

“Don’t be stingy,” Fan Yao said, “What harm is it in giving me some more? To be brutally honest, you are so crafty that Ku Toutuo is afraid of your scheming.”

Seeing him wanted more of the antidote, Lu Zhangke suddenly stood up and said, “Ku Dashi, could it be that the people you want to rescue is not Mijue Shitai and your beloved daughter?”

Fan Yao was about to make some excuse when suddenly they heard footsteps on the courtyard; about seven, eight people rushed in. One of them was heard saying, “The footprints stop here. Could it be that Concubine Han is in the Wan An Temple area?”

Lu Zhangke’s expression changed; he pulled the cup back into his bosom, out of Ku Toutuo’s reach. He thought that Ku Toutuo had prepared an ambush; as soon as he took the antidote, he would make his move. Fan Yao waved his hand, telling him not to panic, then he took a blanket and covered up Concubine Han, including her head; he also pulled down the bed curtain.

“Mr. Lu, are you home?” one of the men on the courtyard called out. Fan Yao pointed to his own mouth, reminding Lu Zhangke that he was a mute, telling him to answer.

“What is it?” Lu Zhangke said in loud voice.

“One of the concubines from the palace is kidnapped,” that man replied, “We trace the bandit’s footprints and looks like he came to Wan An Temple.”

Lu Zhangke shot an angry look toward Fan Yao; his meaning was clear: ‘If you are not intentionally framing me, with your kind of skill, how could you leave a trail behind?’

Fan Yao grinned widely and smiled. He made some hand signals, telling him to send these men away; while in his heart he thought, “Wei Fuwang truly went all the way; he directed the track from the palace to this place.”

Lu Zhangke coldly laughed and said, “You don’t scatter and look around, but making disturbance here. What do you want?” Because of his high level of martial art skill, everybody was scared of him. That man answered indistinctly and did not dare to say anything else. He ordered his men to disperse and search the temple.

Lu Zhangke knew that with people all around the Wan An Temple searching for Concubine Han, to actually take Concubine Han out of the temple and bring her someplace else would not be easy even though they would not dare to search his room. He frowned and stared angrily at Ku Toutuo.

Suddenly Fan Yao got an idea, in a low voice he said, “Lu Xiong, there is a place within the Wan An Temple which can be used as a good hiding place for your beloved. We’ll wait for half a day then we’ll take her out; I don’t think that will be too late.”

Lu Zhangke angrily replied, “The safest place is in your own room.”

Fan Yao smiled and said, "With this kind of beautiful woman hiding in my room, the Old Toutuo's heart might be moved. Are you sure Lu Xiong won't be jealous?"

"Then what kind of place were you talking about?" Lu Zhangke asked.

Fan Yao pointed his finger toward the peak of the pagoda outside the window while showing a faint smile.

Lu Zhangke was smart; he understood immediately. Raising his thumb he praised, "Good idea!"

The pagoda was used as a prison for the martial art masters of the six major sects; it was under Lu Zhangke's first disciple Wuwang Apu's custody. Other people or other places could be under suspicion, but nobody would suspect the Prince's concubine was hidden in the most heavily guarded place of all: the prison.

"Right now there is nobody on the courtyard," Fan Yao said, "We must not tarry. Let's move." Raising the four corner of the blanket he wrapped Concubine Han inside, making it looked like a big bundle. With his right hand he lifted it up and gave it to Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke, however, thought that he was being swindled; he thought that as soon as he carried Concubine Han on his shoulder, Ku Toutuo would make a racket announcing it to everybody, then Lu Zhangke would be caught red-handed with the kidnapped person in his hand, at that time he would not be able to say anything. Having this thought his expression changed and he did not hold out his hand to receive the bundle.

Fan Yao understood his thought, he said, "Mustn't help someone half way. Sending off Buddha must send him off to Heaven. What harm is it in letting Ku Toutuo protecting you again? Who told me to ask a favor from you?" While saying that he carried the bundle on his back, pushed the door to go out and in a low voice said, "You walk ahead. If anybody stops us to inquire, just kill them."

Walking sideways Lu Zhangke went out the door; he still did not want to let Ku Toutuo walking behind him for fear of any sneak attack. Fan Yao reached back to close the door, then with Concubine Han on his back he walked toward the pagoda.

It was already late eleventh hour (between 7 - 9 pm); other than the pagoda guards, there was nobody else walking around the Temple. As the guards saw Lu Zhangke and Fan Yao they bowed to salute and respectfully moved aside to let them pass. As they arrived in front of the pagoda, someone had already informed Wuwang Apu, so that he was waiting on the door. "Shifu," he said, "I wish you, Senior, well. Are you going to take a walk in the pagoda?"

Lu Zhangke nodded his head; along with Fan Yao he was about to step into the pagoda when suddenly from the moon gate on the east side of the pagoda someone stepped out, it was none other than Zhao Min. Because he was guilty, Lu Zhangke was really shocked. He thought Zhao Min was personally leading her warriors to arrest him. He had no alternative but summon his courage and he stepped forward to pay his respect along with Ku Toutuo and Wuwang Apu.

The previous night Zhang Wuji made such a disturbance and Zhao Min did not know only three people from the Ming Cult came over. She feared they were dispatching a large scale raid; therefore, she personally came to the pagoda on

an inspection tour. Seeing Fan Yao, she smiled slightly and said, "Ku Dashi, I was looking for you." Fan Yao nodded, maintaining his composure. Zhao Min continued, "I want you to accompany me going to a certain place."

Fan Yao was inwardly groaning, "With great difficulty I lured Lu Zhangke into the pagoda; all I have to do is snatching the antidote and then this great endeavor will be brought into its successful completion. Who would have thought that this little girl pick this exact same time to look for me?" Frantically he tried to find an excuse, but could not come up with any good explanation; besides, he was a mute, so he was not supposed to say anything. Suddenly he had an idea, "I'll let Lu Zhangke think of something." Immediately he pointed toward the bundle on his back and shoved it toward Lu Zhangke. Lu Zhangke was taken aback; he inwardly scolded Ku Toutuo as being very malicious.

"Mister Lu," Zhao Min asked, "What is inside Ku Dashi's bundle?"

"Uh ... uh ... It's Ku Dashi's bedding," Lu Zhangke stammered.

"Bedding?" Zhao Min was surprised, "Why is Ku Dashi bringing his bedding along?" she asked. She chuckled and said, "Ku Dashi thinks I am too dumb that he is not willing to take me as his disciple; and now he has to carry his own bedding?"

Fan Yao shook his head; his right hand moved around as if he was making some hand signals, while in his heart he was thinking, "Let Lu Zhangke fabricates all kind of lies. I am a mute, I might as well take advantage of it."

Zhao Min could not understand his hand signals, so she

turned her gaze toward Lu Zhangke, waiting for him to explain. Lu Zhangke's quick mind got a sudden inspiration, he said, "It's like this: last night some sorcerers [Translator's note: the literal translation is 'devil head'] from the Devil Cult came and made some disturbance. Subordinate is afraid they might not give up easily. This ... this ... this is not confirmed yet, but they might come to the pagoda to rescue these people. For this reason Subordinate two martial brothers, along with Ku Dashi, decided to personally guard the pagoda so Junzhu's major plan will not be disturbed. This bedding is Ku Dashi's cotton quilt."

Zhao Min was very pleased; she smiled and said, "Actually I was going to ask Mr. Lu and Mr. He to personally guard the prisoners, but I was afraid I might be condescending toward people of your position, so I was uncomfortable in asking you. Now that the three of you are concerned about me, I couldn't ask any better. With Mr. Lu and Mr. He guarding in here, I am sure those 'devil head' won't be able to do anything; so I don't need to go up the pagoda to take a look. Ku Dashi, please come with me." While saying that she held out her hand to pull Fan Yao's hand.

Fan Yao had no choice; he thought that even if he exposed Lu Zhangke right now, first, it would not do him any good, second, Concubine Han was obviously on his own back. He might not necessarily be able to convince Zhao Min. Hence he handed over the big bundle to Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke held out his hands to receive the bundle and said, "Ku Dashi, I will be waiting for you on this pagoda."

"Shifu," Wuwang Apu said, "Let disciple carry the bedding."

"No need," Lu Zhangke laughed, "This is Ku Dashi's belonging, I want to win his heart, so I must carry this

bedding myself.”

Fan Yao grinned widely, he stretched out his hand to slap the bundle, right on Concubine Han’s buttocks. Luckily her mute acupoint was sealed; otherwise she would cry out in shock. But Lu Zhangke was scared out of his wits; his countenance paled. Without delay he bowed toward Zhao Min and carrying Concubine Han on his back he hurriedly entered the pagoda. His mind had already cooked up a plan; as soon as he entered the pagoda, he would wrap a cotton quilt inside the blanket. If Ku Toutuo told Zhao Min about him, he would deny any knowledge of Concubine Han.

End of Chapter 26.

Chapter 27 - Soaring Down from a Hundred-foot Pagoda

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



By this time the smoke and fire filled the air, it almost reached near the place where those masters were standing. If they did not jump soon, they would inevitably become barbequed meat. Yu Lianzhou thought that rather than being burned to death, he would rather plunge to death, he jumped from the Pagoda down to the ground.

Following Zhao Min, Fan Yao went out of the Wan An Temple complex. He was both anxious and feeling strange; did not know where Zhao Min would take him. Zhao Min pulled her cloak over her head, covering her beautiful hair. “Ku Dashi,” she quietly said, “We are going to look for that guy Zhang Wuji.”

Fan Yao was startled; he cast a sidelong glance to her but she averted his gaze. Her cheeks blushed; as if she was 70% shy and 30% happy. She did not look like she already knew about him. His heart was relieved. He recalled the situation of the previous night, when she met Zhang Wuji in the Wan An Temple; where they were facing each other as archenemies. As soon as the word ‘archenemies’ came into his mind, his heart was stirred. “Enemy?” he thought, “Could it be that Junzhu [Princess] fell in love secretly with my Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]?” But then another thought came into his mind, “Why does she want me to go with her? Why didn’t she take her trusted subordinates, the Xuanming Elders? Ah, right! It must be because I am mute, so I won’t leak her secret.” Having this thought he nodded his head, with a strange-looking smile on his face.

“What are you laughing at?” Zhao Min angrily asked.

Of course Fan Yao could not tell her what he thought was funny; thereupon he busily gesticulated, telling her that Ku Toutuo would do his best to protect the Princess, that he would accompany the Princess even going to the dragon’s pool or tiger’s cave. Zhao Min did not speak anymore; she quietly led the way, and very soon they had arrived at the gate of the inn where Zhang Wuji stayed.

Fan Yao was secretly surprised, “Junzhu is really resourceful, she knew exactly where Jiaozhu stays,” he thought, while following her entering the inn.

Zhao Min asked the innkeeper, "We are looking for a guest by the surname of Zeng." Turned out when he checked into the inn Zhang Wuji was using his fake name, Zeng Aniu. The innkeeper went inside to inform the guest.

Zhang Wuji was sitting in meditation, circulating his internal energy, waiting for the fire signal at the Wan An Temple to render his assistance; when suddenly he heard someone was looking for him. He felt strange, but he went out anyway. Arriving at the reception room he saw the visitors were Zhao Min and Fan Yao. "Not good!" he silently groaned, "Looks like Miss Zhao has exposed Fan Youshi's identity and now she is here to deal with me." He had no choice but step forward and cup his fists, "I didn't know Miss Zhao was here; please forgive me for not welcoming you," he said.

Zhao Min said, "It's not convenient to talk in here. What do you say we go to the small restaurant over there and have three cups of wine?"

"Very well," Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but to agree.

Zhao Min was still leading the way; she was the first to leave the inn. They walked past five shops before they finally arrived at a small restaurant. There were several tables made of rough wood planks scattered sparsely inside the restaurant, with wooden tubes of chopsticks on the tables. It was already late in the evening; there was no other guest inside the restaurant. Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji sat facing each other. Fan Yao made some hand signals, saying that he was going to drink some wine on the outer hall. Zhao Min nodded her head; she called the waiter and ordered a bowl of hot pot with three catties of fresh mutton, plus two catties of white wine.

Zhang Wuji's heart was full of suspicions; he thought she was a princess, yet she went to this dirty little restaurant to eat mutton soup with him. He wondered what kind of trick she was playing.

Zhao Min poured out two cups of wine. She took the cup in front of Zhang Wuji; drank it a little and said with a smile, "There is no poison in this wine; set your heart at peace and have a drink."

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss invites me here, I wonder what instructions do you have for me?"

"Please drink three cups, then we'll talk," Zhao Min replied, "I'll dry my cup first to honor you." She raised her cup and drank it dry.

Zhang Wuji also raised his cup. Under the light from the coal of the hot pot stove he faintly saw lipstick mark on the edge of the cup, while his nose caught a soft and sweet smelling fragrance. He did not know whether the fragrance came from the lipstick mark on his cup, or it was the perfume she was wearing. With a shaken heart he drank the wine.

"Please drink two more cups," Zhao Min said, "I know you are suspicious toward me, so I'll drink each cup first."

Zhang Wuji knew she was very shrewd; he certainly must set up his guard. Although she was unexpectedly willing to taste the wine in advance, he would still be braving a great danger. In the end he drank three cups anyway. He tried to feel if there was anything unusual, but he could not find any. Raising his head he saw a faint smile on her graceful face, the wine had made her cheeks blush a little bit; truly it was a tender and extremely beautiful face. Zhang Wuji did not

dare to look at her too long, hastily he turned his gaze somewhere else.

In a low voice Zhao Min said, “Zhang Gongzi [young master, a respectful term to address a young man], do you know who I am?” Zhang Wuji shook his head. Zhao Min said, “Let me tell you today. My father holds authority over the imperial armed force, the Ruyang Prince. I am a Mongolian girl, my real name is Minmin Temur. The Emperor granted me the title of Shao Min Junzhu. ‘Zhao Min’ two characters, is the name I chose to be my Han name.”

If Fan Yao did not tell him that morning, Zhang Wuji would have been shocked; but listening to her revealing her true identity without concealing anything was also beyond his expectations. Only he was not used to pretend, so he did not show an expression of great surprise.

“What?” Zhao Min was surprised, “So you have already found out?”

“No, I haven’t. How can I?” Zhang Wuji replied, “But I know that you are but a young girl yet you command that many Wulin masters, your position must be unusual.”

Zhao Min gently stroked the wine cup in her hand. She was silent for half a day. Lifting up the wine pot she poured two cups of wine and then slowly said, “Zhang Gongzi, I have a question I would like to ask you. Please answer me truthfully. If I killed that Miss Zhou of yours, what would you do?”

Zhang Wuji was startled. “Miss Zhou has never offended you; how could you kill her for no reason at all?” he asked.

“There are some people I don’t like, so I have them killed. Do you think I only kill those who offended me?” Zhao Min

replied, "Some people continuously offend me, yet I did not kill them. Take you, for example, how many times have you offended me?" While saying this, her eyes were smiling.

Zhang Wuji heaved a deep sigh and said, "Miss Zhao, I offended you because I did not have any other choice. You have given me the medicine I need to save my San Shibo [third martial (older) uncle] and Liu Shishu [sixth martial (younger) uncle]; for that I will be eternally grateful."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "I think a third part of you is muddleheaded. Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting received their injuries from my subordinates. You did not blame me, but thank me instead?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "My San Shibo was injured twenty years ago; at that time you haven't been born yet."

"Those people are my father's subordinates; therefore, they are also my subordinates. So what's the difference?" Zhao Min asked, "Anyway, don't divert the subject, I asked you: If I killed your Miss Zhou, what would you do? Would you kill me to avenge her?"

Zhang Wuji was silent for half a day before answering, "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Zhao Min pressed, "You just don't want to say it, do you?"

Zhang Wuji said, "My father and mother were forced to their death by some people. They are from Shaolin Pai, Huashan Pai, Kongtong Pai ['pai' = Sect] and the others. When I got older my reasoning also grew; but the more I think, the more I don't understand: Who was my parents' real killer? I should say it was not Kong Zhi Dashi [Reverend Kong Zhi], Tie Qin

Xiansheng [Mister Iron Qin], those people; I can't even say it was my (maternal) grandfather or my uncle; so much so that I can't say it was your subordinates, Ah Er, Ah San, the Xuanming Elders, and so on. All I can say is that it was fate; I have thought it over yet I could not come to the clear truth. Let's just say that those people were the killers; then I would kill them all one by one. What do I gain? My father and mother would not come back to life. Miss Zhao, these past several days I have been thinking: If everybody does not kill somebody else, live in harmony with each other, love each other as friends, won't that be good? I don't want to seek revenge by killing someone; I also hope others would not kill and harm other people."

He had had this thought for a long time, only he had not told Yang Xiao, he had not told Zhang Sanfeng, he had not told Yin Liting, yet suddenly in this small restaurant he told it to Zhao Min. Once it came out of his mouth, suddenly he felt weird.

Listening to him pouring out his heart Zhao Min paused to ponder, and then she said, "You are very kind-hearted. I can't do that. If someone killed my father or my brother, not only I would kill him and his whole family, I would also kill his relatives, his friends, everybody who is related to him. I will wipe them clean."

"Then surely I must stop you," Zhang Wuji said.

"Why?" Zhao Min asked, "Are you going to side with my enemy?"

"You kill one person, you will add one guilt to your life," Zhang Wuji said, "To the person you killed, after he died he won't know anything, so that was that. But how about his parents, his children, his brothers or sisters, his wife; won't

they feel unbearable grief? When you recall what you did in the future, your conscience will not be peaceful. My 'yi fu' [godfather] has killed many people. Although he has never said anything, I know he feels deep regrets in his heart."

Zhao Min did not say anything; she quietly pondered over what he said. Zhang Wuji asked, "Have you killed anybody?"

Zhao Min smiled and said, "I have not. But when I am older, I will kill a lot of people. My ancestor is Genghis Khan the Great Emperor, Tuolei, Badou, Xuliewu, Khubilai, those heroes. I regret that I was born female. If I were a man, hey, hey, I would certainly accomplish great undertakings." She poured out one more cup of wine, drank it, and said, "You have not answered my question."

"If you killed Miss Zhou, or anybody related to my subordinates, then I will no longer consider you as my friend; I will never see you again, nor will I speak to you," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min laughed, "Then do you currently consider me as your friend?" she asked.

"If I hated you in my heart, then I would not sit together and drink some wine with you," Zhang Wuji said, "Ah! It is so difficult for me to hate anybody. All my life the person I hated most was that 'hun yuan pi li zhang' [Lightning Palms of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun. [Translator's note: previously it was 'shou' (hand) instead of 'zhang' (palm); perhaps Jin Yong 'forgot'?] Yet now that he died, I feel sorry for him. I actually wish he did not die."

"If I die tomorrow, what would you think?" Zhao Min asked, "I bet you will say: Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth, my wicked and fiendish enemy has died; from this time on I will be spared of many troubles."

“No, no!” Zhang Wuji loudly said, “I am not looking forward to your dying; not in the least bit. Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei] has scared you by threatening to cut your face several times. Later on when I think about it I am very anxious.”

With a captivating smile Zhao Min blushed and lowered her head.

“Miss Zhao,” Zhang Wuji said, “Please don’t make things difficult for us. Why don’t you release the six major sects’ masters; then we all can live happily as friends, won’t that be good?”

“Very good,” Zhao Min delightfully said, “That’s what I was hoping for. You are the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, your words carry a lot of weight. Go and talk to them, tell them to surrender to the royal government. Wait till my father becomes the Emperor, then he will grant rewards to everybody.”

Zhang Wuji slowly shook his head, “Our Han people all have a wish: to drive you, Mongolians, from invading our land,” he said.

Zhao Min abruptly stood up and said, “What? You dare to say such preposterous thing, defying your superior? Don’t you realize you are blatantly rebelling against the government?”

Zhang Wuji replied, “I am a rebel. Don’t tell me you realized it just now?”

Zhao Min fixed her gaze at him for a long time; the anger and shock on her face slowly dissipated, turning into tenderness and despair. Finally she sat back down and said,

"I have already known for a long time, but I want to hear it from your own mouth before I can believe it was absolutely true. You are really beyond any help." These words were spoken with intense bitter feeling.

Zhang Wuji's heart was soft to begin with; this time he could not bear to hear her grieving even more, he almost blurted, "I will listen and obey you." But this thought disappeared in a flash; he tried to control his mind, but could not find some comforting words.

Two people sat facing each other silently for a long time. Finally Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, it is late, let me walk you home."

"You don't want to accompany me much longer, do you?" Zhao Min asked.

"No!" Zhang Wuji frantically said, "If you want to sit here, drinking and talking, then I'll accompany you."

Zhao Min smiled slightly, then slowly said, "Sometimes I am thinking: if I am not a Mongolian girl, also not a Junzhu, but a common Han girl just like Miss Zhou, then perhaps you will treat me a lot better. Zhang Gongzi, what do you say: am I prettier, or Miss Zhou is prettier?"

Zhang Wuji had never expected this kind of question to ever come out of her mouth; but he remembered that after all, barbarian women were frank and did not guard their speech too much. Under the lamp light he saw her to be sweet and extremely pretty; he could not help but blurted, "Of course you are prettier."

Zhao Min reached out with her right hand to hold the back of Zhang Wuji's hand, her eyes showed happiness. "Zhang Gongzi," she said, "Would you like to see me often? If I invite

you from time to time to come over here and have a drink, would you come?"

As his hand was being touched by her soft and tender palm, Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping madly. Calming his heart down he said, "I can't stay here for too long. In a few days I am going to the south."

"What do you do in the south?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "Even if I don't tell you, you will be able to guess; if I do, I'll make you angry ..."

Zhao Min averted her gaze toward the round moon outside the window; she suddenly said, "You have made a promise to do three things for me. Have you forgotten your promise?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten," Zhang Wuji said, "As soon as Miss tells me, I will do my utmost to fulfill it."

Zhao Min turned her head back, looking straight at his face. She said, "Only now do I have my first request. I want you to accompany me to get that Tulong [Slaughtering Dragon] Saber."

Zhang Wuji had already guessed that her three requests would not be easy to do; but never in his life would he guess that the first request was already a very difficult matter to do. Zhao Min saw his distress look and said, "What? You are not willing? This request certainly does not violate the way of the chivalry; it is also not something you are unable to accomplish."

Zhang Wuji thought, "The Tulong Saber is in the hand of my Yifu; this fact is well-known in Jianghu [river and lake -

martial art world], I don't have to hide the truth from her." Thereupon he said, "The Tulong Saber belongs to my Yifu, 'Jin Mao Shi Wang' [Golden Mane Lion King], Xie Daxia [Great Hero Xie]. How can I betray my Yifu by taking his saber and give it to you?"

Zhao Min said, "I do not meant for you to steal or snatch or take it by deceit; I also do not want to own this saber. All I want is for you to tell me your Yifu's whereabouts, so I can borrow it and play with it for a couple of hours, and then I will return it to him right away. You are Yifu-yizi [foster-father, foster son]; don't tell me he won't allow you to borrow it even for a couple of hours? I want to take a look at it, not to swindle his possession; I won't use it to kill anybody, do you think I am violating the way of the chivalry?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Although this saber is talked-about in the martial world, but actually it doesn't have anything worth looking about it except it is very heavy and unexceptionally sharp."

"There is a saying," Zhao Min said, "'Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long, hao ling tian xia, mo gan bu cong. Yi tian bu zhu, shei yu zheng feng?' [Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares not to follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete? – Meh's translation] The Yitian Sword is in my hand; I surely must see what this Tulong Saber looks like. If you are concerned, you can stay by my side while I am examining the Saber. With your current skill level, I should not be able swindle you in any way."

Zhang Wuji considered carefully, "My original plan was leaving immediately to fetch Yifu after rescuing the six major sects' masters, to ask him to hold the Jiaozhu position.

Miss Zhao promises to take a look at the Saber only for a couple of hours. I know it's hard to say whether she has some crafty trick under her sleeves, but if I guard by her side, she won't be able to seize the Saber. Only Yifu once said that the Tulong Saber holds a big martial art secret. Yifu has taken possession of this treasured Saber before his eyes were blinded, yet by his intelligence and wisdom he still could not penetrate the details of this secret. Given only a short couple of hours, how could this Miss Zhao uncover the secret? Besides, Yifu and I have not seen each other for more than ten years; perhaps on that isolated island he has succeeded in understanding the Saber's secret."

Seeing he was hesitating and not answering, Zhao Min laughed and said, "It's up to you if you are not willing. I can think of something else for you to do, and it surely will be much more difficult."

Zhang Wuji realized this woman was extremely cunning; if she presented another difficult problem, he might not be able to do it. Thereupon he busily said, "Very well, I agree to borrow the Tulong Saber for you. But let me get it clear: you can only borrow it for a couple of hours. If you change your mind and want to steal it, I will not let you go."

"That's right," Zhao Min laughed, "I can't use a saber, especially a heavy one. What's good it is for me? You are respectfully presenting the Saber to me so I will not dare to offend you. When are you going to leave?"

"Within these next several days," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Nothing could be better," Zhao Min said, "I am going to pack now. When it's time to leave, come and get me."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Are you going to come?" he asked.

“Of course,” Zhao Min answered, “I heard your Yifu lives on an isolated island far away. If he is not willing to return to the mainland, will you take tens of thousands ‘li’s journey to bring the Saber to me, let me look at it for a couple of hours, then take another tens of thousands ‘li’s journey to return the Saber back to him, and then take tens of thousands ‘li’s journey again to go back home? There is no such logic in this world.”

Zhang Wuji remembered the dangerous great billows of the ‘Bei Hai’ [Northern Sea]; whether they would be able to find the ‘bing huo dao’ [Ice and Fire Island] in the vast and boundless ocean was still a great uncertainty. There was no guarantee if they would not meet any accident during the three times voyage back and forth to the island, so what she said was right. Moreover, his Yifu had lived on ‘bing huo dao’ for more than twenty years; he might not be willing to return to the mainland in his sunset years. “The wind and the waves on the ocean are merciless,” he said, “Are you sure you want to brave this danger?”

“If you can brave the danger, why can’t I?” Zhao Min replied.

With uncertainty in his voice Zhang Wuji asked, “Will your father let you go?”

Zhao Min replied, “Father has given me the authority to command the Jianghu warriors. For the last several years I have wandered to the east and journeyed to the west; Father has never forbidden me.”

Hearing the words ‘Father has given me the authority to command the Jianghu warriors’ Zhang Wuji’s heart was moved, “My journey to the ‘bing huo dao’ to fetch Yifu might take years or at least months,” he thought. “Supposing she

is executing the luring-the-tiger-to-leave-the-mountain trick, then she might launch a large scale attack on my Cult while I am gone. But if she goes with me, her subordinates might lose command and spare me unnecessary worries over those I leave behind." Thereupon he nodded and said, "Very well, I'll come and get you when it's time for us to leave."

He had not finished speaking when suddenly they saw bright red light from beyond the window, followed by a faint clamoring noise of commotion coming from a distance.

Zhao Min went to the window to take a look. "Aiyo!" she cried out in alarm, "The Wan An Temple Pagoda is on fire! Ku Dashi, Ku Dashi, come here, quick!" She called out several times, but Ku Toutuo did not answer. She went to the outer hall but Ku Toutuo was nowhere to be seen. She asked the waiter and was told that that Toutuo went away as soon as they arrived; he did not even sit down, and he had left for a long time. Zhao Min was astonished; suddenly she recalled his strange smile earlier and could not help blushing. She lowered her head and stole a glance toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji saw the fire was getting bigger by the minute; he was afraid his Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others' internal strength had not recovered and they died inside the burning Pagoda. "Miss Zhao," he said, "I have to go!" Before finished speaking he had rushed out the restaurant.

"Wait!" Zhao Min called out, "I am coming too!" But by the time she reached the door, Zhang Wuji had disappeared.

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When Ku Toutuo was taken away by the Princess, Lu Zhangke decided to take Concubine Han into his disciple,

Wuwang Apu's room. The Wan An Temple Pagoda had a total of thirteen floors, so the total height was about thirteen 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10ft or 3.3m]. The top three floors were consecrated to house the image of Buddha, Buddhist literature, and other religious articles; nobody could stay in these floors. Wuwang Apu was in charge of guarding the Pagoda, so he occupied a room in the tenth floor; from which he could see all around and thus had a better control over the overall situation.

As he entered the room, Lu Zhangke told Wuwang Apu, "Go and guard outside the room, don't let anybody enter in." As Wuwang Apu went out the room Lu Zhangke immediately closed the door, untied the bundle to let Concubine Han out. Her beautiful face showed both shocked and hurt expression; her sad eyes were pleading. Lu Zhangke quietly said, "Now that you have arrived here, you don't have to be afraid. I will treat you well."

He did not want to unseal her acupoints yet, fearing she would cause a commotion. Thereupon he gently laid her down on Wuwang Apu's bed, pulled up a quilt to cover her up; and then took another cotton-quilt to replace the bundle and set it aside. With Concubine Han safely tucked in the bed Lu Zhangke started to attend to other businesses. He did not dare to stay inside the room for too long; he went out hurriedly, forbidding Wuwang Apu from entering the room or allowing others from doing so. He knew his main disciple had always regarded him with respect and fear, so it was unlikely for him to disobey his master's order.

Lu Zhangke thought, "I need Ku Toutuo to help me keeping the secret. If I want to win his favor, I must rescue his old lover and his daughter first. Luckily the Cult Leader of the Devil Cult made such disturbance last night, precisely over that girl by the surname of Zhou. I can always put the blame on him by saying the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu rescued Old Nun

Miejue and Miss Zhou. Truly the Heaven is on my side; Junzhu will not suspect anything. This little devil head's martial art is superior, Junzhu cannot blame us from failing to stop him."

All Emei Pai's female disciples were imprisoned on the seventh floor. Miejue Shitai, being a Sect Leader, was imprisoned alone inside a smaller room. Lu Zhangke ordered the guard to open the door and then walked in. He saw Miejue was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her eyes were closed in meditation. She had been on a hunger strike for several days, but although she looked thin and pale, her countenance still showed her proud and valiant character.

"Miejue Shitai, how are you?" Lu Zhangke greeted.

Slowly Miejue Shitai opened her eyes. "It's not good in here, what good are you talking about?" she asked. [Translator's note: It was a play on words: 'How are you?' in Chinese is 'ni3 hao3', with literal translation 'you good']

"You are so stubborn," Lu Zhangke said, "My master said keeping you alive is useless, I am ordered to send you to heaven."

Miejue Shitai had determined to die anyway, so she said, "Very well. Only I do not need to bother Sire to do it; just lend me a knife and I will do it myself. I only request Sire to bring my disciple Zhou Zhiruo, I have something I need to talk to her."

Lu Zhangke turned around and went out the room, ordering the guard to bring in Zhou Zhiruo; he thought, "The feeling between a mother and a daughter is really unusual; otherwise why didn't she ask for her other main disciples, but ask for her instead?"

Not long afterwards Zhou Zhiruo entered her master's room. "Mr. Lu," Miejue Shitai said, "Please wait outside, I only need to speak a little bit with her."

Zhou Zhiruo waited until Lu Zhangke left the room before she pushed backward to close the door, and then she threw herself at her master's bosom and wept. For all her life Miejue Shitai had been strong and firm; this time she was going to die, she could not restrain to be emotionally touched; she stroked Zhou Zhiruo's hair gently. Zhou Zhiruo knew her time to speak with her master was not long; immediately she narrated how Zhang Wuji came to rescue her the previous night. Miejue Shitai wrinkled her brows and was silent for half a day before she finally said, "Why did he only rescue you and did not rescue other people? That day on the Brightness Peak you stabbed him; why did he repay it by rescuing you?"

Zhou Zhiruo's cheeks blushed and she softly said, "I don't know."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai indignantly said, "That kid is so wicked. He is the leader of the Devil Cult; how can he have good intentions? I think he is setting a trap and he is luring you to enter in."

"He ... he is setting a trap?" Zhou Zhiruo wondered.

"We are the Devil Cult's archenemy," Miejue Shitai said, "I don't know how many devil disciples died under my Yitian Sword. The Devil Cult hates Emei Pai to their bones; how could they come over to rescue us? This surnamed Zhang's devil-head must have been looking at you and took a liking; he wanted you to fall into his snare. He ordered some people to capture us then he would deliberately rescue you to curry

your favor, so that from this time on you will always be grateful to him.”

“Shifu,” Zhou Zhiruo weakly said, “I think ... I think he was sincere.”

Miejue Shitai was very angry; in a loud voice she said, “You are just the same as that good-for-nothing Ji Xiaofu; captivated by Devil Cult’s disciples. If I had my internal energy, I’d strike you dead with my palm.”

Zhou Zhiruo was so scared that her whole body trembled. “Disciple does not dare,” she said.

In a stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “You really do not dare, or was that just sweet-talk to deceive your master?”

With tears in her eyes Zhou Zhiruo said, “Disciple simply does not dare to disobey ‘En shi’s [benevolent master] instruction.”

Miejue Shitai said, “Kneel on the floor. Make a heavy oath.”

Following her command, Zhou Zhiruo knelt down but she did not know what to say. Miejue Shitai said, “Say it like this: ‘Xiao Nuzi [lit. little/young woman – this is kind of hard to translate without losing the real meaning] Zhou Zhiruo make an oath against the Heaven: if in the future my heart adores Zhang Wuji, that evil Cult Leader of the Devil Cult, if I become husband and wife with him, let the bones of my departed parents bodies in the ground do not have peace; let my Shifu Miejue Shitai’s departing soul becomes restless spirit, haunting me night and day for the rest of my life; and if I give birth to sons and daughters with him, let my sons become slaves and my daughters prostitutes.”

Zhou Zhiruo was shocked; her natural disposition was meek and gentle. She had never thought of making such a sinister oath; not only cursing her dead parents and cursing her benevolent master, but cursing the children who had not even born yet. She saw her master's eyes were staring fiercely at her face with a malicious gleam. Suddenly she felt dizzy; yet she did not have any choice but repeating what her master said, word for word.

As she listened to this heavy oath Miejue Shitai's countenance softened. "All right, you can stand up," she warmly said.

Zhou Zhiruo's tears fell like rain; she stood up with a heavy and hurting heart. Miejue Shitai's face turned serious when she said, "Zhiruo, I did not deliberately force you; I am doing this for your own good. You are a young and naïve girl. Later on your Shifu wouldn't be able to look after you anymore. If you repeat your Ji Shijie's [martial (older) sister] mistake by treading on the road to disaster, your Shifu in the next world will not rest in peace. Moreover your Shifu is relying on you to carry the heavy responsibility of our Sect; you must not be careless." While saying that she took out the iron ring on her left index finger, stood up, and said, "Emei Pai's disciple Zhou Zhiruo, kneel down to receive my order."

Zhou Zhiruo was startled; she knelt down immediately.

Miejue Shitai lifted the iron ring high above her head and said, "The Third Generation Sect Leader of Emei Pai, 'Nu ni' [lit. female (Buddhist) nun] Miejue, hereby passes the Sect Leader position to the Fourth Generation 'nu di zi' [female disciple] Zhou Zhiruo."

After she was compelled by her master to make that heavy oath, Zhou Zhiruo's mind was still confused; now that

suddenly hearing the Sect Leader position was being passed on to her, she was so shocked that she did not know what to think.

Slowly, word by word, Miejue Shitai said, “Zhou Zhiruo, receive this iron ring of our Sect; held out your left hand.”

Still stupefied, Zhou Zhiruo held out her left hand, Miejue Shitai put the iron ring on her index finger. With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “Shifu [Master], disciple is young, I joined the sect not too long ago, how can I bear this heavy responsibility? You, Senior, must not be desperate; please don’t say such thing. Disciple really cannot ...” Speaking to this point, she hugged her master’s legs and cried.

Waiting outside, Lu Zhangke was already impatient for a while; hearing the weeping noise he banged the door and called out, “Hey! Are you done talking? Your talking days in the future are still long!”

Miejue Shitai shot back, “What kind of nonsense are you talking about?” To Zhou Zhiruo she said, “Do you dare to disobey your Shifu’s command?” Immediately she proceeded by telling Zhou Zhiruo the Sect Leader’s rules and regulations, wanting her to commit them in her memory.

Zhou Zhiruo could see through her master’s words; it was like she was leaving her death wish; Zhou Zhiruo was alarmed and scared. “Disciple cannot do this, disciple is not able ...”

In a stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “If you don’t do what I said, you are disobeying your Sect’s ancestors.” Noticing Zhou Zhiruo pitiful face and remembering about her impending departure from this world, she thought about how she was placing this heavy responsibility on this mild-

mannered, soft and weak female disciple's shoulder; Mijue Shitai was afraid her disciple would actually not be able to withstand this heavy load. But among the Emei disciples she was the one with the highest comprehension and the one most likely to reach the pinnacle of their martial arts and brighten their reputation. Other than her there was no other disciple worthy of this position. Mijue Shitai also realized that in the days to come this young disciple would inevitably experience innumerable difficulties and dangers; she could not help but feel heartbroken.

Mijue Shitai raised Zhou Zhiruo up and embraced her in her bosom; in a soft voice she said, "Zhiruo, I picked you to be the next Sect Leader instead of your numerous Shijies [martial (older) sisters], not because I am biased toward you. It was because the Emei Pai has always been dominated by women; the Sect Leader's martial art must be outstanding. Only then will we be able to stand among the heroes of the Wulin world."

"How can a disciple's martial art exceed those of numerous Shijies?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Mijue Shitai smiled and said, "Their accomplishment is limited; once they reach a certain level, it would be very difficult for them to make a good progress. This is the Heaven-given natural ability and no power on earth can change it. Right now you are inferior to your Shijies, but in the future your progress will be unlimited. Hmm, unlimited, truly unlimited. That's exactly what you will be."

Zhou Zhiruo was confused; she looked at her master with eyes full of questions. Mijue Shitai put her lips close to Zhou Zhiruo's ear and in a very low voice said, "Since you are now our Sect Leader, I am going to tell you our Sect's greatest secret. The founder of our Sect was Guo Nuxia

[Heroine Guo]; she was the youngest daughter of Daxia [great hero] Guo Jing. In those days Guo Daxia's name shook the world; all his life he was known to possess two kinds of special skills: the first one was military strategy, the second was martial art. Guo Daxia's wife was Huang Rong, Huang Nuxia; she was known as the most intelligent and quick-witted person. She had realized early on that the Yuan army's power was unstoppable; that in the end Xiangyang could not be defended. They, husband and wife, had made up their minds to sacrifice their lives for their country as a token of their patriotism and loyalty. But would they bring Guo Daxia's special skills down to the grave? Moreover, she had predicted correctly that although the Mongolians would occupy China for a moment, in the end the Han people would not be willing to live in slavery under the Tartars' rule; that there would be bloody battles on the Central Plains ['zhong yuan'] in the future. At that time the military strategy and the martial art would play a very significant role. For that reason she hired a very skilled craftsman to melt the black steel sword Yang Guo, Yang Daxia gave to our founder Guo Zushi [martial art ancestor], mixed it with refined gold from the western area, and forged it into the Tulong [slaughtering dragon] Saber and the Yitian [relying on Heaven] Sword."

Zhou Zhiruo had long ago heard about the names of Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword; but it was only now did she find out that this pair of Saber and Sword was forged by the mother of her own Sect's Founder, Guo Nuxia.

Miejue Shitai continued, "While these weapons were forged, Huang Nuxia and Guo Daxia two people toiled for a whole month writing the military strategy and the martial art manuals and hid them inside the weapons. The Tulong Saber held the military strategy manual. It was called 'tu long' with the wish that someday someone would obtain the military

strategy book, then drives out the Tartars and kills the Tartar Emperor. Among the martial art secrets concealed in the Yitian Sword, the most precious are the Nine Yin Manual and the Eighteen Dragon-subduing Palm Techniques, hoping that the later generation who study the martial arts from the Sword would enforce justice on behalf of Heaven and rid the people of evil.”

Zhou Zhiruo listened with eyes wide open; the more she listened, the more marveled she became. Meanwhile her master continued the story, “After Guo Daxia and his wife finished forging the Sword and the Saber, they gave the precious Saber to their son, Guo Gong Polu [Translator’s note: the word ‘gong’ here denotes respect or honor; there is no English equivalent to this way of addressing other people]; while the precious Sword was passed on to our Sect’s Guo Zushi. It goes without saying that Guo Zushi was taught martial arts by her parents, as Guo Gong Polu was also instructed in military strategy. But when the Xiang Yang’s city wall was broken, Guo Daxia husband and wife, as well as Guo Gong Polu died together as patriots. Guo Zushi’s character did not go very well with her father’s martial art style; for this reason our Sect’s martial art style differs from that of Guo Daxia of the past.”

After a short pause Miejue Shitai continued, “Over the last one hundred years the Wulin world was shaken repeatedly; these Saber and Sword have changed hands several times. The later generation only knows that the Tulong Saber is the Wulin world’s most venerable, and only the Yitian Sword is worthy to be its match; but why is it most venerable, nobody knows. Guo Gong Polu died for his country in his youth; he had no descendant not disciple, so only our Sect’s Guo Zushi alone knew the Saber and the Sword’s secret. Before her death, the Senior had spent considerable amount of effort to find the precious Tulong Saber, but she had not

succeeded. On her death bed she passed on this secret to my 'en shi' [benevolent master], Feng Ling Shitai. Upon receiving Zushi's commandment, my 'en shi' also looked for the Tulong Saber, but to no avail. In turn when she died she passed on this Sword and Guo Zushi's commandment to me.

It was not too long after I took over the Sect Leader position of our school when your Shibo [martial (older) uncle] Gu Hongzi made an appointment for a martial arts match with a young master from the Devil Cult. They agreed to fight one-on-one, not allowing anybody to receive help from anybody else. Your Shibo knew that although his opponent was young, his martial art skill was actually very profound. Thereupon he came to me to borrow the Yitian Sword."

As Zhou Zhiruo heard the phrase 'a young master from the Devil Cult' she could not help her heart thump madly, and her face involuntarily blushed; but she immediately remembered, "It was not him, I am afraid at that time he was not even born yet."

Meanwhile Miejue Shitai continued, "At that time I wanted to go along and help him, but your Shibo insisted that he wanted to keep the good faith; saying he stated clearly with that devil-head that no third-party participation was allowed; therefore, he was firm in not letting me go along. In that martial art match your Shibo's skill was certainly not below his opponent; but because the devil-head employed a dirty trick, in the end he managed to land a palm on your Shibo's chest and snatched away the Yitian Sword before it even came out of its sheathe."

"Ah!" Zhou Zhiruo exclaimed, remembering how Zhang Wuji snatched away the Sword from Miejue's hand on the Brightness Peak.

Her Shifu continued, "That devil-head laughed coldly several times and said 'What a big reputation Yitian Sword has! In my eyes it is no different that scrap copper and rusty iron!' Casually he threw the Sword to the ground and swaggered away. Your Shibo picked the Sword up and went back to the mountain to return it to me. Who would have thought that because of his proud character, the more he thought about the lost, the more he was grieved. He only managed to take a three-day journey when he caught an illness along the way and was not able to get up again. The Yitian Sword fell into the hands of the local authorities who in turn presented it to the royal government. Do you know who was this evil disciple of the Devil Cult who angered your Shibo Gu Hongzi to his death?"

"No ..." Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I wonder who that was?"

"It was he who later on harmed your Shijie Ji Xiaofu; that devil-head Yang Xiao!" Miejue Shitai replied.

Right at that moment Lu Zhangke banged the door and shouted, "Are you done talking? I can't wait much longer!"

"Don't be impatient," Miejue Shitai said, "We will be done very soon." Quietly to Zhou Zhiruo she said, "We don't have much time; we can't talk too much. This Yitian Sword was later on granted by the Tartar Emperor to the Ruyang Prince so I went to the Ruyang Palace to steal it back. It is so unfortunate that by an evil plot the Sword has fallen into the hand of the Devil Cult."

"No, it was that Miss Zhao who stole it," Zhou Zhiruo said.

Miejue Shitai stared at her and said, "This surnamed Zhao girl is obviously in cohort with that Cult Leader of the Devil Cult. Don't tell me that up to this point you still don't believe

your Shifu?”

In all honesty it was hard for Zhou Zhiruo to believe her; but she did not want to argue with her master. Mijue Shitai continued, “I have a strong reason why I want you to take over the Sect Leader position. This time I fall into the crafty villains’ hands, my reputation is falling down the drain; I do not want to get out of this Pagoda alive. That lecherous man surnamed Zhang has dirty thoughts toward you, but I believe he won’t harm your life. You may pretend to get close to him, and then seize the opportunity to take back the Yitian Sword. The Tulong Saber is in the hand of his foster father, that wicked bandit Xie Xun. This kid will not reveal Xie Xun’s whereabouts no matter what; but I know there is one person in this world who will be able to get this Saber.”

Zhou Zhiruo knew her Shifu was talking about her; she was startled and shy, and happy but scared at the same time.

Mie Jue Shitai said, “That person is you. I want you to use your beauty to obtain the treasured sword. I know this is not a very chivalrous thing to do, but for an important matter I don’t want to worry about little things. Just think about it: presently the Yitian Sword is in that surnamed Zhao girl, while the Tulong Saber is in that wicked bandit Xie Xun’s hand. Both have close relationship with him. If by any chance he acquires both the Sword and the Saber, and if by chance he obtains Guo Daxia’s military strategy and martial arts manual; then it will be catastrophic for the common people. I don’t know how many innocent people in the world will lost their lives, families will be broken, not to mention the great undertaking of driving out the Tartars will be more difficult to accomplish. Zhiruo, I know perfectly well that this matter is too difficult, in all honesty I don’t want you to bear it; but what is the purpose of us training martial arts all our lives? Zhiruo, I beseech you for the sake of the common

people in the world.” Speaking thus, she suddenly stood up, and then bent her knees and bowed in front of Zhou Zhiruo.

To say that Zhou Zhiruo was mildly shocked is certainly an understatement; she hastily knelt down and called out, “Shifu! Shifu! You ...”

“Quiet!” Miejue Shitai said, “Don’t let the wicked bandit outside hear. Do you agree? If you don’t, I won’t get up.”

Zhou Zhiruo was utterly confused; in just a short moment her Shifu had just asked of her three very difficult matters. The first was to make the heavy oath that she would not to fall in live with Zhang Wuji, the second was for her to take over the Sect Leader position; afterwards she wanted her to utilize her beauty to entice Zhang Wuji to obtain the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword. Each one of these three might take her ten years to decide. Based on her gentle and warm character, chances are she would not agree to any of them, much less she was given just a short time to accept. Her head was spinning and she passed out, losing her consciousness completely.

Suddenly feeling a sharp pain on her upper lip she opened her eyes and saw her Shifu was still kneeling in front of her. Crying she said, “Shifu, please get up.”

“Do you agree to my request, then?” Miejue Shitai asked.

Bursting into tears Zhou Zhiruo did not have any choice but nodding her head; she almost fainted again. Miejue Shitai grabbed her hands and in a low voice said, “After obtaining the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword, here is how you’ll get the secret inside: With one hand holding the Saber and the other the Sword, exert your internal energy and strike the Saber and the Sword to each other. Both the Sword and the

Saber will break simultaneously, and then take the secret scrolls from inside the Saber's body and the Sword's blade. This is the only way to take the secret out of those precious Sword and Saber, and to destroy them at the same time. Do you understand?" She spoke in low voice, but her tone was very urgent.

Zhou Zhiruo nodded her head. Miejue Shitai continued, "This is our Sect's greatest secret; ever since Guo Daxia husband and wife passed it on to our Sect's Guo Zushi, only the Sect Leaders of our school are aware of it. To think that the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword are weapons with matchless sharpness, let's just say that someone getting hold of these precious sword and saber at the same time; who would dare to strike the Sword and the Saber to each other and thus risking the destruction of these valuable weapons? After you obtain the military strategy book, go and find a good and honest warrior, a patriot who is undoubtedly loyal to the country; give the book to him, tell him to make an oath to drive the invaders away. Take the martial arts manual and train yourself in it. The Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palm is a pure positive, hard and ferocious technique; it is not suitable for you. You may learn the Nine Yin Manual. According to my 'en shi' [benevolent master], Guo Zushi said that the original Nine Yin Manual was so broad and deep that it would be impossible to master it in a short period of time. But Huang Nuxia had thought that obliterating the Tartar's fierce and ruthless government is an urgent matter; accomplishing it one day sooner means sparing the common people one less day of suffering. For that reason among the secrets inside the Yitian Sword she had written some chapters that can be learned intensively. However, after the important matter is accomplished, you must go back and revisit the prescribed path to strengthen your foundation. Those intensive courses can only be used temporarily. It was created from Huang Nuxia's profound

intelligence and wisdom to provide a quick fix. It is by no means a true matchless-under-the heaven's martial art method. You have to keep this firmly in your mind."

Zhou Zhiruo nodded her head absentmindedly. Miejue Shitai continued, "Our Sect has two greatest desires: the first is to drive out the Tartars and get our mountains and rivers back; the second is to make Emei Pai the leader in the martial arts world, surpassing Shaolin, Wudang, and the other schools, to become the Number One Sect in the Wulin world of the Central Plains [zhong yuan]. These two goals are very difficult to achieve; but now we have a way. As long as you comply with your Shifu's injunction, you can achieve it one by one. At that time your Shifu in the next world will be very grateful to you."

As she finished speaking Lu Zhangke again knocked on the door. "Come in!" Miejue Shitai said.

The door opened and to their surprise instead of Lu Zhangke it was Ku Toutuo who walked in. Miejue Shitai did not think differently; she thought these people were the jackals from the same lair anyway, so whoever came in did not make any difference. "Please take this child out," she said. She was not willing to commit suicide in Zhou Zhiruo's presence, to spare her from grieving.

Ku Toutuo came closer and in a low voice he said, "This is the antidote; take it quick. As soon as you hear commotion outside, everybody get out and join hands to kill the enemy."

Miejue Shitai was surprised. "Who are you, Sire?" she asked, "Why are you giving the antidote to me?"

"I am the Ming Cult's 'guang ming you shi' [Brightness Right

Emissary] Fan Yao,” Ku Toutuo replied, “I managed to steal the antidote and come here to rescue Shitai.”

“Devil Cult traitor!” Miejue Shitai was angry, “You still want to play joke on me!”

Fan Yao smiled and said, “All right! Let’s just say I am playing a joke on you. This is a poison to add the effectiveness of the poison in your system. Do you have the guts to take it? Once it goes into your belly, within a couple of hours your intestines will ruptured and you will die miserably.”

Without saying anything Miejue Shitai reached out into his hand, took the powder, and swallowed it.

“Shifu ... Shifu ...” Zhou Zhiruo called out in alarm.

“Quiet!” Fan Yao said, stretching out his other hand, “You must also take this poison.”

Zhou Zhiruo was shocked, but Fan Yao had already grabbed her cheeks and poured the powder in her mouth, followed by a cup of water; very soon the powder had entered her throat.

Miejue Shitai was shocked too; she thought with Zhou Zhiruo’s death her meticulously planned scheme would go down the drain. Disregarding her own safety she threw herself with an open palm toward Fan Yao. Unfortunately her internal energy was lost; although her palm technique was exquisite, but it was devoid of any strength. With only a light push Fan Yao sent her body flying to the wall.

Fan Yao laughed and said, “All Shaolin monks and all Wudang heroes have taken my poison. Whether our Ming Cult is good or evil, you’ll find out really soon.” With a big laugh he turned around, went out the room and slammed the door closed.

When Zhao Min took Fan Yao for a rendezvous with Zhang Wuji, his mind was still fully occupied by how to steal the antidote. As soon as Zhao Min told him to wait in the outer hall of that small restaurant, he left immediately, rushing toward the Wan An Temple, straight to the Pagoda. When he reached the tenth floor, he saw Wuwang Apu was standing on guard in front of his own room. As Wuwang Apu saw Fan Yao, he greeted him respectfully, "Ku Dashi."

Fan Yao nodded while laughing in his heart. "Good!" he thought, "The Old Lu disregards the honor of his own school; he is hiding inside, having a good time with Wangye's [Prince, lit. King Master] beloved concubine, while he orders his disciple to guard the door. I'd better rush in and seize the antidote while this old man is doing the Heaven-knows-what." Slanting his body sideways he slipped through Wuwang Apu's side and suddenly stretched out his finger, sealing the acupoint on Wuwang Apu's lower abdomen.

It would still be very difficult for him to avoid this attack even if he was completely alert not to mention Wuwang Apu was taken by surprise. Once his acupoint was sealed, his body went numb and he was paralyzed. Inwardly he was feeling very strange; when did he offend this mute Toutuo? Could it be that his 'Ku Dashi' greeting just a moment ago was not respectful enough?

Fan Yao shoved the door open and quick as lightning he plunged into the bed. Before his feet even touched the floor his palm had already struck toward someone on the bed. He fully realized the level of Lu Zhangke's martial art skill; if he failed to inflict serious injury with this one palm strike, then it would not be easy to determine victory or defeat in a life and death fight, hence he had exerted his whole strength in this one strike.

“Splat!” the quilt burst open; cotton fibers flew everywhere. Fan Yao opened the cotton-waded quilt and as he looked, he saw Concubine Han with blood coming out of her mouth and nose. She was as dead as a jade statue. But Lu Zhangke’s shadow was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly Fan Yao got an idea; he turned around and went out the room. He pulled Wuwang Apu inside and stuffed him underneath the bed. He had just closed the door when he heard Lu Zhangke’s angry voice outside, “Apu! Apu! How dare you leave your post?”

Turned out Lu Zhangke had been waiting outside Miejue Shitai for quite a while; he wondered how long these mother and daughter would fussily talk to each other. He did not dare to offend Ku Toutuo, so he did not dare to crash in. His heart wandered toward Concubine Han and he missed her already; thereupon he returned to Wuwang Apu’s room, only to see that his always-obedient main disciple was unexpectedly not guarding outside the door. He was really angry. Shoving the door open he was relieved not to see anything unusual. Concubine Han was still lying on the bed facing inward, her body was still covered by the cotton quilt.

Lu Zhangke bolted the door behind him before turning around and smiled, “Pretty girl, I am going to unseal your acupoint, but you must not make any noise.” While speaking he stretched out his hand toward the bedding, his finger aimed toward Concubine Han’s spine. Suddenly a strong hand, with its five fingers as hard as a pair of iron pliers, grabbed the main artery on his wrist; at once his body weakened, not a bit of strength was left in his body. He saw from the cotton quilt a head covered in long hair came out; it was none other than Ku Toutuo.

With his right hand Fan Yao held tight Lu Zhangke’s main artery, while at the same time his left hand moved like the

wind, sealing nineteen major acupoints all over Lu Zhangke's body. Lu Zhangke was paralyzed; he lay on the floor with his eyes full of anger. Fan Yao pointed his finger to him and said, "The Old Man here has never changed his surname, nor has he changed his name. I am the Ming Cult's Right Emissary of the Brightness; surnamed Fan, given name Yao. Today you have fallen into my hand. You are always proud of your peerless intelligence, but you are actually a stupid and useless man. If I kill you now, I am neither a hero nor a real man; therefore, I am going to spare your life. If you have the ability, look for Fan Yao to seek your revenge in the future."

He was not done yet; he stripped Lu Zhangke naked and lay him down next to Concubine Han's dead body, and then he covered both people, one dead the other alive, under the cotton quilt. Now at last he took the antler staff, unscrewed the tip of the antler to get the antidote; and then went to the prisoners' room one by one to distribute the antidote to Kong Wen Dashi, Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and the others. In doing so he had spent a lot of time; especially since he had to explain everything to the prisoners again and again. Finally he reached Mijue Shitai's room, and when she did not believe it was the real antidote, he bluffed her by saying it was another poison. Fan Yao hated her for killing so many of his Ming Cult brethren, so if he could hurt her some, he was very pleased.

Finished distributing the antidote Fan Yao felt very pleased of himself, but suddenly he heard clamoring noise of people shouting outside the Pagoda; among those people He Biweng's voice was the loudest, "This Ku Toutuo is a spy, get him down here, quick!"

Fan Yao groaned inwardly, "This is bad, really bad!" he thought, "Who helped this fellow out?" Poking his head

outside he saw He Biweng leading a large number of warriors surrounding the Pagoda.

As they saw Ku Toutuo's head, Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui shot their arrows while cursing, "Wicked thief Toutuo, you harmed us really bad!"

Actually, when He Biweng and the other two's acupoints were sealed, they should not be able to get out of trouble for a while; moreover, they were hidden inside Lu Zhangke's room, so normally nobody would dare to rashly go in. Who would have thought that Ruyang Palace dispatched a lot of warriors everywhere, including to the Wan An Temple. When they failed to see the Prince's beloved concubine's track, someone remembered Lu Zhangke's lecherous nature. But these warriors were always afraid of him; although they suspected the missing of the Prince's beloved concubine was somewhat related to him, who would dare treading on a tiger's head by offending him? After contemplating for a long time, the captain of the guards, Captain Ha, finally made up his mind. He sent a low ranking soldier to knock on Lu Zhangke's door; he figured out that a person of his rank, although Lu Zhangke was angry, he would not stoop so low as to harm this lowly soldier.

The soldier knocked on the door several times, but nobody answered. Captain Ha clenched his teeth and ordered the soldier to just shove the door open and take a look. To their surprise they saw He Biweng, Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui were lying on the floor. By this time He Biweng had managed to circulate his internal energy, trying to unseal his acupoints. He had unsealed three, four passages; and then Captain Ha helped him unseal the rest. Very soon he was able to move about freely.

He Biweng's anger had reached the heaven; he inquired

about Lu Zhangke and Ku Toutuo's whereabouts and was told that they went to the Pagoda. Thereupon he led the warriors to surround the Pagoda and then shouted loudly, calling Ku Toutuo to go down and fight to the death.

Fan Yao was secretly alarmed, "Fight to the death then fight to the death, do you think the one surnamed Fan is scared of you?" he thought, "Only these stinky monks and old nun have not taken the antidote for too long; they will still need about one and a half hour to recover their internal strengths. This He Biweng has heard my conversation with Lu Zhangke; although I kill the old Lu, I still cannot close his mouth. What should I do?"

At a loss of what to do Fan Yao paced back and forth for a while. He Biweng called out again, "Deserve-to-die Toutuo, if you don't get down, I am going up!"

Fan Yao returned to the room to get Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han who were still bundled inside the cotton quilt; he brought them to the railings and lifted them high in the air. "Old He!" he called out, "If you come near the gate even for one step, I am going to throw this old lecher Lu down."

The warriors were carrying torches high in their hands, which made the surrounding area as bright as day; but the Pagoda was too tall that the light could not reach Fan Yao. However, in spite of the dim light they could still recognize Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han's faces.

He Biweng was greatly shocked. "Shige [martial (older) brother], Shige, are you all right?" he called out. After calling out several times without hearing Lu Zhangke's reply, he started to think that his Shige was killed by Ku Toutuo. "Thief Toutuo, you killed my Shige. I swear I won't

live on the same earth as you do.”

Fan Yao unsealed Lu Zhangke’s mute acupoint. Immediately Lu Zhangke shot some abusive words, “Thief Toutuo, you are the enemy’s spy! I am going to cut you into thousand pieces ...” Fan Yao let him shout curses for a while before sealing his mute acupoint again.

Seeing his martial brother did not die, He Biweng was somewhat relieved; he was afraid Ku Toutuo would really throw his martial brother down, so he did not dare to come near the gate.

This deadlock situation dragged for quite a while; He Biweng did not dare to rescue his martial brother, while Fan Yao only hoped to gain as much time as possible. Half an hour by half an hour passed by, Fan Yao stood by the railings and laughed loudly, calling out, “Old He, your Shixiong [martial brother] has such nerve that he dared to kidnap the Prince’s beloved concubine. I caught them red-handed and captured them on the spot. You are still thinking of protecting your Shixiong? Captain, Sire, quickly arrest this old man. These two martial brothers are staging a rebellion, committing a capital crime. If you arrest him, I am sure the Prince will heap you with rewards.”

Captain Ha cast a sidelong glance toward He Biweng; he wanted to take an action, but lack the courage to do so. He felt strange to suddenly see Ku Toutuo open his mouth and speak, but the evidence in front of his eyes was that Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han were wrapped together in one cotton quilt. Besides, he had already had some previous suspicions, so in his heart was 90% believed what Fan Yao said. “Ku Dashi, please get down,” he loudly called out, “Let us go together to the Prince and sort this thing out. The three of you are senior masters, Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly

person] does not dare to offend any of you.”

Fan Yao was very bold and he thought that while he went to the Prince's palace to sort out right from wrong, the prisoners would have had enough time to recover from their poisoning. “Wonderful! Wonderful!” he called out immediately, “I am just about to go to Wangye to receive the reward. Captain, Sir! Please look after this Old Man He, don't ever let him escape!”

While he was still speaking suddenly they heard sound of hoof beats, a rider was coming fast toward the temple, straight to the Pagoda. The surrounding warriors immediately bowed to pay their respect, “Xiao Wangye! [Young Prince]” they greeted.

From the Pagoda looking down Fan Yao saw that the crown on this person's head glittered under the flame light. When he was dismounting from a big and tall white horse, Fan Yao noticed that that person was wearing an embroidered gown. He was none other than the Ruyang Prince's crown prince, Kuku Temur, whose Chinese name was Wang Baobao.

“Where is Concubine Han?” in stern voice Wang Baobao asked, “Fuwang [father king] is extremely angry; he ordered me to come over and investigate.”

Captain Ha stepped forward to give his report; he said that Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han did indeed in the temple and were currently in Ku Toutuo's hands. He Biweng hastily said, “Xiao Wangye, don't listen to this rubbish; that Toutuo is a spy, he frames my Shige ...”

Wang Baobao raised his eyebrows and called out, “All of you, get down here to talk!”

Fan Yao had been serving in the palace for a long time, he knew Wang Baobao was very astute and competent; he was not inferior to his father. Fan Yao might be able to deceive others, but it would be difficult to hide the truth from this young prince. If he went down, the young prince might be able to see through his scheme in just a few sentences. Then if the young prince ordered the warriors to besiege him, He Biweng alone would give him enough trouble, making it difficult to escape, not to mention rescuing the imprisoned heroes on the Pagoda. In loud voice he said, "Xiao Wangye, I have Lu Zhangke in my hand. His Shidi [martial (younger) brother] hates me to the bones. If I came down, he would surely kill me."

"Just get down quickly, Mr. He will not kill you," Wang Baobao said.

Fan Yao shook his head and shouted, "It is still safer for me to stay on this Pagoda. Xiao Wangye, for all my life Ku Toutuo has never spoken; today the circumstance has forced me to open my mouth. I am doing it all to repay Wangye's kindness to me. If you don't believe me, Ku Toutuo would rather jump into the ground to meet my death to show my loyalty to you."

Listening to him, Wang Baobao knew that 70, 80% of what he said was nonsense; so it was obvious that he was trying to stall. In a low voice Wang Baobao asked Captain Ha, "What conspiracy is he in? He is deliberately stalling. Is he waiting for someone to come?"

"Xiao Ren does not know ..." Captain Ha replied.

"Xiao Wangye," He Biweng cut him off, "This bandit Toutuo has stolen my Shige's antidote; he must be planning on rescuing the rebels imprisoned in the Pagoda."

Wnag Baobao realized it immediately. “Ku Dashi,” he called out, “I know your loyalty. Quickly get down here; I am going to heap rewards on you.”

“My legs were kicked by Lu Zhangke earlier,” Fan Yao said, “Both legs are broken. I must not move now. Xiao Wangye, please wait a moment, as soon as I can move, I’ll come down immediately.”

“Captain Ha,” Wang Baobao barked his order, “Send some men to go up and carry Ku Dashi down.”

“No, no,” Fan Yao said, “As soon as I move, my two legs will be crippled.”

This time Wang Baobao did not have any suspicion anymore. With his own eyes he saw Concubine Han and Lu Zhangke were wrapped together inside the cotton quilt. Even if there was nothing going on between the two, he was certain his father king would not want to have Concubine Han anymore. In a low voice he said, “Captain Ha, set the Pagoda on fire. Set your men around with their bows and arrows. Whoever jumps down from the Pagoda, shoot him dead.”

Captain Ha complied; he passed the order around. His archers surrounded the Pagoda with bows and arrows, ready to shoot; while the other warriors spread around to gather firewood and grass to light up the fire.

He Biweng was shocked. “Xiao Wangye,” he called out, “My Shige is up there.”

Wang Baobao coldly said, “This Toutuo can’t stay up there forever; as soon as the Pagoda is on fire, he will come down.”

He Biweng called out, “What if he throw my Shige down?”

Xiao Wangye, please don't light the fire."

"Humph," Wang Baobao snorted, ignoring his plea.

A short moment later the warriors had gathered enough kindling material and they set the Pagoda on fire.

He Biweng had always enjoyed good reputation in the Wulin world; even when he entered the service in the Ruyang Palace he had always been highly revered. Unexpectedly today not only he had fallen into Ku Toutuo's sinister plot, he was also ignored by the Young Prince. Seeing his martial brother in grave danger he did not care anymore whether it was the 'Xiao Wangye' or the 'Da Wangye' [lit. old king master]. Raising his pair of crane-beak pens he charged toward the warriors who were lighting the fire. 'Bang, bang!' two warriors were thrown away.

Wang Baobao was very angry. "Mister He," he shouted, "Are you defying my command?"

"If you did not set the Pagoda on fire, I would not dare to defy your command," He Biweng replied.

"Set the fire!" Wang Baobao shouted. With a wave of his left hand five foreign monk wearing red robes jumped from behind his back; they snatched away the torches from the warriors' hands and tossed them to the firewood and grass on the base of the Pagoda. As soon as the kindling material was lit, the fire was raging wild.

He Biweng was very anxious. He snatched a spear from a warrior's hand and frantically beat the wood and grass, trying to extinguish the fire.

"Arrest him!" Wang Baobao shouted.

Those five foreign monks in red unsheathed their sabers and surround He Biweng immediately. He Biweng was very angry; he dropped the spear and snatched the saber of a foreign monk to his left. Eluding his hand the foreign monk flipped the saber over and hacked his shoulder. He Biweng moved sideways to elude, while from behind came a gust of saber wind; as a result two sabers struck each other.

There were a total of eighteen foreign monks with high level of martial art under Wang Baobao's command; they were known as the 'Shi Ba Jin Gang' [eighteen Buddha's warrior attendants], consisted of Five Sabers, Five Swords, Four Staves, and Four Cymbals. These five monks were the 'Five-Saber Buddha's Warriors'. Each one of them alone was far below He Biweng in term of martial art level; however, with five of them fighting together, they complement each other in defense and offense. Furthermore, He Biweng's martial art level was high, but Zhang Wuji struck him until he vomited some blood the previous day; his internal energy suffered serious damage. On top of everything right in front of his eyes the fire was raging wild, his martial brother was in a precarious condition; unavoidably he could not keep himself calm and steady. As a result, it was difficult for him to score a quick victory.

In the meantime, Wang Baobao's subordinates kept adding wood and grass to make the fire even bigger. The Pagoda was constructed of brick and wood. Very soon the first several lower floors were starting to burn. Fan Yao dropped Lu Zhangke and dashed toward the room in which the Wudang heroes were imprisoned. "The Tartars are burning the Pagoda," he called out, "Has everybody's internal energy recovered?" But Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the others were still sitting cross-legged, cultivating their internal energy in full concentration. Nobody replied; apparently they were at a critical moment of their recovery process.

Several guards came to attack him. Fan Yao struck and grabbed them one by one; throwing them to their death at the bottom of the Pagoda. The rest of the guards scrambled downstairs over the fire, trying to save themselves.

A moment later the fire had reached the fourth floor, where the people from Huashan Pai were being imprisoned. They did not have time to wait for the recovery of their internal energy; in this dangerous situation everybody fled to the fifth floor. But the fire kept creeping upward to the fifth floor, causing the Kongtong Pai people also ran to the sixth floor. Some were rather slow, resulting in their clothes to catch fire. Fan Yao was at a loss.

Suddenly he heard someone calling out, “Fan Yaoshi [Right Emissary Fan], catch!” It was Wei Yixiao’s voice.

Fan Yao was greatly delighted; looking toward the direction of the voice he saw Wei Yixiao was standing at the rooftop of a big building behind the Wan An Temple. Wei Yixiao swung his arms to throw a long rope toward Fan Yao and Fan Yao caught it.

“Tie it on the railings, we’ll make a rope bridge,” Wei Yixiao called out.

Fan Yao had just tied the rope to the railings when ‘swish!’ Zhao Yishang of the ‘Shen Jian Ba Xiong’ [Eight Divine Archers] shot an arrow and cut the rope. Simultaneously Fan Yao and Wei Yixiao opened their mouths to curse; they knew that if they want to build a rope bridge, they would have to get rid of these Eight Divine Archers.

“Shoot your granny,” Wei Yixiao cursed, “If that one does not drop his bow and arrow, the Old Man will butcher him first.”

While cursing he drew his sword and jumped down.

His feet were barely touching the ground when five foreign monks wearing dark green robes surrounded him with swords in their hands. They were the 'Five-Sword Buddha Warriors' from the 'Eighteen Buddha Warriors' under Wang Baobao's command. The swords in their hands glittered, their sword moves were strange; and they attacked Wei Yixiao together.

He Biweng brandished his pair of crane-beak pens, fighting a fierce battle. "Xiao Wangye," he loudly called out, "If you don't order your men to put off the fire, don't blame me for being impolite to you."

Wang Baobao did not pay any attention to him. Four foreign monks with long Buddhist staves in their hands stood around the Young Prince, guarding him from any possible sneak attack.

He Biweng's anxiety rose up; his double-pen suddenly moved in 'heng sao qian jun' [sweeping a thousand soldiers], forcing the three foreign monks in front of him to retreat two steps. He Biweng anxiously rushed toward the Pagoda. The five foreign monks ran after him. He Biweng's feet kicked the ground and he flew to the eaves of the first floor. Seeing the fire was raging wild, the five foreign monks did not pursue.

He Biweng jumped from floor to floor. When he reached the eaves of the fourth floor Fan Yao poked out his head from the seventh floor; lifting high Lu Zhangke's body he loudly called out, "Old He, stop! If you move one more step, I am going to throw the Old Lu down, let him become deer mince meat." [Translator's note: the 'Lu' of Lu Zhangke means 'deer']

He Biweng obediently did not dare to move again. “Ku Dashi,” he called out, “We, martial brothers, have never offended you in the past, we still don’t have any enmity against you today, why do you make things difficult for us? If you want to save your old sweetheart Mijue Shitai and your beloved daughter Miss Zhou, then rescue them. I will not stop you.”

After taking the antidote from Ku Toutuo, Mijue Shitai thought that she had taken a poison and would die soon; but then Zhou Zhiruo had also taken the poison. Her lifetime hopes were shattered; how would her heart not bitter? While she was grieving suddenly she heard commotion at the base of the Pagoda; she heard Ku Toutuo and He Biweng’s argument, then she also heard Wang Baobao issued an order to set the Pagoda on fire. She heard it all, one by one, clearly. She felt strange, “Could it be that this devil-like Toutuo is really rescuing us?”

She thought she might as well try, whether good or bad. Immediately she felt warm energy flowing up from her ‘dan tian’ [pubic region]; which was different from when she was still under the influence of the poison. She would rather starve herself to death than obeying Zhao Min’s order to get out to the mail hall and contend in martial arts, as a result, she had been fasting for six, seven days. Her stomach was completely empty; therefore, as the antidote entered her belly, it rapidly entered the blood and neutralized the poison in her system. Her recovery was faster than everybody else. Furthermore, her internal energy was profound; it was even higher than Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, He Taichong and the others, perhaps it was somewhat inferior only to the Abbott of Shaolin Pai, Kong Wen Shen-seng [divine monk].

As the effect of the ‘Ten Fragrance Muscle-weaken Powder’

was gradually dispersed by the antidote, her own internal energy was able to push the toxicity away. In less than an hour later her internal energy had been recovered 50, 60%. She was still cultivating her internal energy intensively when suddenly from outside came He Biweng's voice; each word was like an arrow piercing her ear, "...If you want to save your old sweetheart Miejue Shitai and your beloved daughter Miss Zhou, then rescue them. I will not stop you."

How could she not get angry hearing this 'Old Sweetheart' and the other nonsense? In big strides she walked out of her room toward the railings. "What nonsense are you blabbering about? Such a dirty mouth!" she shouted angrily.

He Biweng looked at her imploringly, "Lao Shitai [Old Shitai], please tell your old ... old friend to let my Shige down. I guarantee your family of three will be able to leave safely. Xuanming Elders always say one as one, two as two; in no way we will fail to keep our words."

"What family of three?" Miejue Shitai asked angrily.

Although he was in a precarious situation, Fan Yao could not help to laugh aloud. Feeling very proud of himself he said, "Lao Shitai, this old man said I was your old sweetheart, and that Miss Zhou was our daughter."

Miejue Shitai was really, really angry, that under the flickering light of the fire downstairs her face looked terrifying. "Old He," she roared, "Come up here! I want to exchange a hundred palms with you before we talk again."

If it was different time, when He Biweng was challenged to come up, he would come up; he was not scared of the Sect Leader of Emei. But this time his martial brother had fallen into the enemy's hand; he did not dare to act recklessly. "Ku

Toutuo," he called out, "It was you who said that; I certainly would not talk irresponsibly."

Miejue Shitai shifted her gaze toward Fan Yao and in stern voice she asked, "Did you say such thing?"

Fan Yao laughed heartily; he was about to take that opportunity to ridicule her when suddenly he heard loud shouts at the bottom of the Pagoda. He looked down and saw by the flames a shadow was dancing like a fluttering butterfly among the flowers. That shadow moved around the warriors and the foreign monks. 'Bang! Clank! Clank! Bang! Clank! Clank!' everywhere he went a weapon fell down to the ground. The Cult Leader Zhang Wuji had arrived.

Zhang Wuji attacked the five wielding-swords foreign monks who were surrounding Wei Yixiao; sending their swords flying high into the air. Wei Yixiao was delighted; like a flash of lightning he dashed toward Zhang Wuji. "I am going to set the Ruyang Palace on fire," he said in a low voice.

Zhang Wuji nodded; he understood his intention. They had only a few people on their side; if they failed to rescue the masters of the Six Major Sects in a short period of time, the enemy might send more reinforcement. With the Green-winged Bat King went to set the Ruyang Palace on fire, the enemy would be forced, first and foremost, to protect the Prince. It was an excellent 'luring the tiger out of the mountain' or 'removing firewood from under the pot' plan.

Wei Yixiao's dark green shadow flashed by and flew over the tall wall surrounding the Temple. Zhang Wuji looked around him to assess the situation. "Fan Youshi," he called out loudly, "How are you?"

"It's bad!" Fan Yao called back, "The escape route is

completely on fire; we are trapped here.”

By this time, fourteen out of the eighteen foreign monks under Wang Baobao’s command had spread out and surrounded Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji thought that to defeat the enemy he had to capture the leader first; thereupon he turned his attention to that young Tartar prince wearing a golden helmet. If he could capture him, then he could force the Prince to order his people to put off the fire and release the prisoners. Immediately he leaned sideways and slipped from among the foreign monks; he went straight to Wang Baobao fast and fluid like a fish swimming in the water.

Suddenly out of the blue a sword came from his left side, the blade carried a cold gust of wind; in a flash the sword tip was moving toward his chest. Hastily Zhang Wuji drew a step backward, only to hear a woman’s voice said, “Zhang Gongzi, this is my brother. Don’t hurt him.”

The sword in her hand moved in graceful and elegant way; the blade was colder than water. It was the Yitian sword; a sword as beautiful as a flower. The bearer was of course Zhao Min. She hastily followed Zhang Wuji, it was just that she was a bit slower.

Zhang Wuji said, “Please order your people to put out the fire and let the people go; otherwise I will not be polite toward the two of you.”

Zhao Min called out, “Shiba Jin Gang, this man’s martial art is high; all Jin Gang are to fight him together.”

Those eighteen foreign monks had just suffered under Zhang Wuji’s hand; they did not need their Junzhu [Princess] to remind them. They knew their opponent was fierce. ‘Bang! Bang!’ the eight copper cymbals in the Four-

Cymbal Buddha Warriors' hands crashed together. Eighteen foreign monks moved together in front of Wang Baobao and Zhao Min, separating them from Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji took a glance; he saw eighteen foreign monks walked in circle around him. Their footwork was strange, eighteen people formed a human wall; apparently their movement contained many changes. His interest was piqued; he wanted to see if he could break this 'Jin Gang Zhen' [Buddha Warrior Formation]. But right at that moment a loud bang was heard, one of the big pillars on the Pagoda broke and fell down. Turning his head around he saw the fire had reached the seventh floor. Amidst the blood-red flickering tongues of fire two people were engaged in an intense battle; they were Miejue Shitai and He Biweng.

Looking further up he saw the corridor by the railings of the tenth floor was full of people; they were the masters from Shaolin, Wudang, and the other Sects. Their martial arts were not recovered yet; but even if they were, the Pagoda was over ten 'zhang's tall [over 100 feet tall], even if their internal energy and qing gong [lightness skill] were not the slightest bit lost, they would certainly plunge to their deaths if they jumped down.

An idea came into Zhang Wuji's mind; he pondered over it for a moment, "I can't possibly break this Jin Gang Zhen in a short period of time. Even if I did, the other warriors are certainly going to attack me. It won't be easy to capture Miss Zhao's brother. Miejue Shitai has been fighting He Biweng all this time without showing any sign of defeat. It appears that her internal energy has already been restored. Then Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others must also be recovered. Only the Pagoda is too high, they are unable to jump down."

As soon as his mind was made, he moved around the courtyard in lightning fast speed; his hands struck and snatched, slapped and grabbed the Eight Divine Archers and the warriors around the Pagoda. He either knocked down the bows and arrows from their hands, or sealed their acupoints. In a short moment there was no one standing with neither bow nor arrow around the Pagoda. "Seniors on the Pagoda!" he called out, "Please jump down! I will catch you down here."

The people on the Pagoda were stunned; they thought, 'This Pagoda was over ten 'zhang's tall, the force of their bodies falling down would be tremendous, although you have thousand catties strength, how could you catch us?' Immediately some people from Kongtong, Kunlun and some other Sects blurted out, "Surely we cannot jump down; don't listen to this kid! He wants to deceive us so that we will meet our cruel deaths."

Zhang Wuji saw the smoke and fire filled the air, it almost reached near the place where those masters were standing. If they did not jump soon, they would inevitably become barbecued meat. Raising his voice he shouted, "Yu Erbo [second martial (older) uncle], your kindness to me is like a mountain, do you think Xiao Zhi [little nephew] would deliberately harm you? Why don't you jump first?"

Yu Lianzhou trusted ZhangWuji completely; besides, he thought that although his martial art skill was stronger, he would still not be able to save himself. Therefore, rather than being burned to death, wouldn't it be better to plunge to death? "All right!" he called out, "I'll jump down!" Without hesitation he jumped from the Pagoda down to the ground.

Zhang Wuji's eyes followed his uncle closely; he waited until they were about five feet apart before his palm gently

patted his uncle's waist. In this one palm he had unleashed the ultimate power of the 'qian kun da nuo yi' [the great shifting and moving of the universe]; by absorbing and releasing energy he dispersed the falling down momentum from top to bottom to from left to right, and thus sending Yu Lianzhou flying horizontally several feet to the side. By that time his internal energy had been recovered 70, 80%; flipping his body midair he landed steadily on the ground. In one fluid motion his palm struck a Mongolian warrior that he spurted blood from his mouth.

"Da Shige [first martial (older) brother], Si Shidi! [fourth martial (younger) brother]," he loudly called out, "Jump down!"

The people on the Pagoda cheered as they saw Yu Lianzhou land safely on the ground. Out of his deep love toward his son, Song Yuanqiao wanted him to jump down first. "Qingshu," he said, "You jump down!"

Ever since they came out of their prisons, Song Qingshu had always been standing up next to Zhou Zhiruo. "Miss Zhou," he said, "Quickly jump down."

Zhou Zhiruo's internal strength had not been recovered yet; she was unable to help her master, yet she was unwilling to escape alone. Hearing Song Qingshu, she shook her head and said, "I am going to wait for Shifu!"

By this time He Taichong, Ban Shuxian, and the others had jumped down one after another; they were all intercepted by Zhang Wuji using the marvelous power of the 'qian kun da nuo yi' to the fullest; breaking the vertical force of the drop, turning it horizontally, delivering them all one by one from danger.

These people's internal energy had not been fully recovered

yet, but although their strength was only 50, 60% of their normal level, they had already given the foreign monks and the warriors a lot of trouble. Yu Lianzhou and the others snatched some weapons and they formed a fence around Zhang Wuji.

Wang Baobao's and Zhao Min's subordinates were trying to stop Zhang Wuji, but Yu Lianzhou, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and the others blocked them. One more person jumped down from the Pagoda meant one more person was protecting Zhang Wuji. Ever since these people were being held captives by Zhao Min, they had suffered innumerable humiliations and a lot of them even lost their fingers. This time they were freed from their bondage, all of them were staking whatever they have, venting their anger. In a short moment the ground around the Pagoda was littered by more than twenty warriors' corpses.

Seeing the unfavorable situation, Wang Baobao issued an order, "Get my special archer force over here!"

Captain Ha was just turning his body around to carry out the Young Prince's order when he saw the sky toward the southeast corner was bright with fire. He was shocked and immediately called out, "Xiao Wangye, the Palace is on fire! We must hurry to save Wangye!"

Wang Baobao was concerned over his father's safety, he could not be bothered by catching or killing some rebelling thieves. "Meizi, [younger sister - term of endearment]" he hastily said, "I am going back to the Palace. You must be careful!" Without waiting for Zhao Min to answer he turned his horse around and galloped away to the exit.

As Wang Baobao left, the Eighteen Buddha Warriors followed; as did most of the palace guards. They saw the

Palace was on fire and thought that a large number of rebels had attacked the Palace, they were very anxious; nobody guessed it was a trick played by Wei Yixiao, one person.

Meanwhile Song Qingshu, Song Yuanqiao, Zhang Songxi, Mo Shenggu, and the others had jumped down from the Pagoda. Very soon the situation was reversed, the warriors were outnumbered. A little later Kong Wen Fang Zhang [Abbot Kong Wen], Kong Zhi Dashi [Reverend Kong Zhi], as well as the senior monks from the Damo Hall and Luohan Hall had also jumped down. Zhao Min's warriors lost any chance to gain victory.

Zhao Min thought that if they did not escape now, they would change from captors to captives. Therefore, immediately she issued an order, "Everybody, get out of Wan An Temple!" Turning toward Zhang Wuji she said, "At dusk tomorrow, I will be waiting for you to have some drinks. I hope you'll come."

Zhang Wuji was startled; but before he could answer Zhao Min flashed one of her captivating smiles, and hurriedly retreated toward the hall at the rear of the Wan An Temple.

He heard Fan Yao, still on top of the Pagoda, shouted loudly, "Miss Zhao, quickly jump! Your eyebrows are burned. You don't want to jump, do you want to be a beautiful-woman charcoal?"

"I want to be with Shifu!" Zhou Zhiruo replied.

In the meantime, Mijue Shitai was still in fierce battle against He Biweng. When the floor they were on was burned down, they jumped to the higher floor. Very soon they were fighting in the room at the corner of the tenth floor. Her internal energy had not 100% recovered, but from the beginning she had disregarded her life by concentrating all

her strength in offense without thinking about defense at all. On the other hand, He Biweng was first of all anxious over his martial brother's safety, so he could not focus his attention to the battle. Secondly, his previous injury from Zhang Wuji's palm had not been healed completely. Thirdly, he had just recovered from the poison administered by Fan Yao, plus his acupoints were sealed for quite a long time, his limbs were not as agile as at normal time. Therefore, the two of them fought for a long time without clear winner or loser.

Miejue Shitai heard her disciple's voice; "Zhiruo," she called out, "Quickly jump down! Don't mind me! This old thief has humiliated me too much, how can I let him live?"

He Biweng was groaning inwardly, he thought, "This old nun is disregarding her own life fighting me; while I must save my martial brother. Must I lose my life together with her in this hell hole?" He shouted loudly, "Miejue Shitai, it was Ku Toutuo who said that, what do I have to do with it?"

Miejue Shitai held her palm and turned around, "Stinky Toutuo, was it you who said all those crazy talk?" she asked Fan Yao.

Fan Yao was amused, he deliberately asked, "What crazy talk?" He wanted Miejue Shitai to say it with her own mouth, 'He said that I am your old sweetheart, and that Zhou Zhiruo is our daughter.' But how could she say such thing? However, hearing Fan Yao's answer, Miejue Shitai knew He Biweng was telling the truth. She was so angry that her body trembled.

As Miejue Shitai was turning her back toward him, suddenly a burst of black smoke rolled in; He Biweng saw this was a good opportunity to launch a sneak attack. Thereupon amidst the smoke he launched a palm strike toward Miejue

Shitai's back.

Zhou Zhiruo and Fan Yao saw it clearly; they shouted together, "Shifu, watch out!" "Old Nun, watch out!"

Miejue Shitai quickly struck her left palm backward to counterattack, but He Biweng's yin-yang palms had already arrived. Her left palm blocked He Biweng's left palm, but her back was struck by his right-hand Xuanming Shen Zhang [Xuanming Divine Palm]. This Xuanming Divine Palm was the exact same palm he exchanged with Zhang Sanfeng at Mount Wudang a few years back. Miejue Shitai staggered; she almost fell down.

Zhou Zhiruo was greatly shocked; she rushed ahead to support her Shifu. Fan Yao was very angry; "Wicked despicable coward!" he roared, "You are not worthy to live!" Lifting the cotton quilt containing Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han, he threw the bundle down.

He Biweng loved his martial brother very much; without thinking he jumped, trying to catch the bundle, but it was already too far outside the Pagoda that He Biweng only managed to grab the corner of it. Because of the weight, He Biweng was also dragged down.

Zhang Wuji was standing at the base of the Pagoda. Because of the smoke, he could not see clearly the battle high on the Pagoda. He saw a big object followed by a man was falling down. He did not know what the bundle was, but amidst the smoke he saw vaguely there was somebody inside the bundle. He could see clearly however, that the man was He Biweng. He realized this man had caused him endless suffering, even his parents' death was closely related to him. But in the end Zhang Wuji just could not bear to see him falling down to meet his cruel death. Immediately he flew up

and with both palms he struck the bundle and He Biweng, sending each one of them flying about three 'zhang's to the right and to the left.

He Biweng flipped his body midair and landed on the ground. "Really dangerous!" he inwardly called out in alarm. Never in his life would he expect Zhang Wuji to render good for evil by saving his life. As he turned his head around to look for his martial brother he was shocked. Turned out Zhang Wuji's palm strike had caused the bundle to burst open, throwing two naked bodies into a pile of burning wood. Lu Zhangke's acupoints were still sealed; he was unable to move that his beard and hair was burned immediately.

"Shige!" He Biweng called out in panic and rushed toward the fire.

As he landed on the fire, before his feet were steady, Yu Lianzhou had called out, "Eat my palm!" followed by a left palm strike toward He Biweng's shoulder.

He Biweng did not dare to block, he shrank his shoulder to evade. It seemed like Yu Lianzhou's palm had lost its momentum, but as He Biweng's shoulder shrunk, the palm followed and 'slap!' He Biweng was so much in pain that his forehead was drenched in cold sweats. Yet rescuing his martial brother was more important than ignoring the pain He Biweng hastily embraced Lu Zhangke and took him flying over the tall wall surrounding the temple.

At that moment a burning big pillar of the Pagoda fell down, crushing Concubine Han's body and in a short moment her body was caught on fire. The people on the ground shouted repeatedly, "Quickly jump down! Quickly jump down!"

Fan Yao fled to the east and leaped to the west to avoid the fire. As the main pillars burned down, the bricks and tiles from the Pagoda started to fall down like rain. The Pagoda was starting to sway, looked like it would collapse anytime.

In stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “Zhiruo, jump down!”

“Shifu, you jump first, then I’ll jump!” Zhou Zhiruo replied.

Miejue Shitai suddenly leaped and hacked Fan Yao’s left shoulder with her palm, while shouting, “The Devil Cult’s thief, I can’t let you go!”

Fan Yao let out a long laugh and jumped down. Zhang Wuji received him with a slap of his palm, let him gently landed on the ground.

“Fan Youshi,” Zhang Wuji praised him, “You have successfully accomplished a very difficult task!”

Fan Yao steadied his feet before answering, “If not because of Jiaozhu’s matchless skill, everybody would become roast pork on top of that Pagoda. Fan Yao’s way of handling affair was improper; what merit do I have?”

Miejue Shitai stretched out her arm to grab Zhou Zhiruo and take her jump down. When she was about a little over a ‘zhang’ away from the ground, she sent all her strength to her arms and threw Zhou Zhiruo several feet upward. That way she broke the momentum of Zhou Zhiruo’s fall that she only had about a ‘zhang’ to fall to the ground, while at the same time her own falling down momentum was actually strengthened.

Zhang Wuji dashed forward to pat her waist with the ‘qian kun da nuo yi’. Who would have thought that even in her death Miejue Shitai was not willing to receive any kindness

from the Ming Cult. Seeing Zhang Wuji's palm was about to reach her, she gathered all her remaining strength to launch an attack. Two palms collided. 'Bang!' Zhang Wuji's palm was shifted sideways. 'Crack!' Miejue Shitai crashed on the ground; her spine, as well as several bones on her body, broke immediately.

On the other hand, Zhang Wuji was hit really hard from her palm strength plus the falling down momentum; blood bubbled up in his chest and he staggered several steps backward. He did not understand because with this one palm attack Miejue Shitai obviously was trying to kill herself.

Zhou Zhiruo threw herself on top of her Shifu's body while crying out, "Shifu, Shifu!" The rest of the Emei disciples, both males and females, all gathered around their master's body in great confusion.

"Zhiruo," Miejue Shitai said, "From this day on, you are our school's Sect Leader. The things I want you to do, you won't disobey all ... all of them?"

Zhou Zhiruo cried and said, "Yes, Shifu, disciple does not dare to forget."

Miejue Shitai showed a faint smile and said, "Then, I can die with closed eyes ..."

Right away Zhang Wuji came forward to check on her pulse, but suddenly Miejue Shitai flipped her right hand and grabbed Zhang Wuji's wrist. In a stern voice she said, "Devil's Cult evil disciple, if you dare to violate my beloved pure disciple, even being a ghost I will not spare ..." The last 'you' word had not been uttered, she had already breathed her last; yet her grip was not loosened up, her five fingernails dug Zhang Wuji's flesh until he was bleeding.

Fan Yao called out, "Everybody, come follow me; we are going out from the western gate. If we tarry, that scoundrel king's cavalry would catch us here."

Carrying Mijue Shitai's lifeless body in his arms Zhang Wuji said in low voice, "Let's go!"

Zhou Zhiruo gently pried her master's fingers from Zhang Wuji's hand, she held out her hand to take her master's body, all the while she avoided Zhang Wuji's eyes; and then she quietly walked out of the temple.

By then the masters from Kunlun, Kongtong and Huashan had already swarmed out the temple. Only Shaolin Pai's Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two 'shen seng' [divine monks], did not lose their seniority demeanor; they came to Zhang Wuji with clasped palms to express their gratitude. And then they exchanged some modest greetings with Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the others before finally they left the temple together.

Zhang Wuji had spent a lot of energy in using the 'qian kun da nuo yi' to rescue the masters from the Six Major Sects; his internal energy was depleted. Last of all he exchanged a palm with Mijue Shitai that he suffered a major internal injury; by now he was so weak that he could not walk. Mo Shenggu took him and carried him on his back. Zhang Wuji took that opportunity to silently cultivating his 'jiu yang shen gong' [the Nine Yang divine strength/energy] that at last his strength was recovered.

Meanwhile it was almost dawn; as the crowd of heroes reached the western gate, they dispersed and went out the city separately to avoid the gate guards. Several 'li's outside the city they met Yang Xiao who had already prepared

several large mule and horse carriages. He congratulated them on escaping the danger.

Kong Wen Dashi [Reverend Kong Wen] said, "If not for the Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu and gentlemen's help today, it is difficult to say what our Central Plains' [zhong yuan] Six Major Sects' fate would be, our gratitude of your kindness is unspeakable. Now about next step, how we are going to proceed, please Zhang Jiaozhu gives us instruction."

"My knowledge is shallow," Zhang Wuji answered, "I don't have any plan, so I invite Reverend Abbot of the Shaolin Pai to give us orders." But Reverend Kong Wen strongly refused.

Zhang Songxi said, "This place is not too far from the city. Today we have made an earth-shattering disturbance inside the Tartar's capital; how could that evil king let it go? As soon as the fire in the palace is extinguished, he would certainly dispatch a cavalry to pursue us. Let us leave this place first before deciding on our next action plan."

He Taichong said, "If that evil king sends a cavalry to pursue us, then that would be best. We can kill them all to vent our several days of built-up anger."

"Our internal strength is not completely recovered yet," Zhang Songxi said, "Killing the Tartars right now is not our priority; we'd better avoid them first."

"Zhang Sixia [fourth hero Zhang] is right," Reverend Kong Wen said, "We could kill many Tartars today, but our own casualty would not be small. We'd better withdraw for the time being." Certainly the words of Shaolin's Abbot carried a different weight. As soon as he opened his mouth, nobody dared to raise any objection anymore.

Reverend Kong Wen asked again, “Zhang Sixia, according to your respected opinion, where should we go to temporarily avoid the enemy?”

Zhang Songxi replied, “The Tartars would certainly expect us to go if not to the south, then to the southeast. We will go to the opposite direction; to the northwest. What do you think?”

Everybody was stunned; yet Yang Xiao actually clapped his hands and said, “Zhang Sixia’s plan is really marvelous. The people of the northwest is sparse, we can look for any uninhabited mountain and hide there for a while. The Tartars would not think of looking for us there.” The more the rest of them think, the more they realized Zhang Songxi’s plan was indeed marvelous. Thereupon they turned their carriages around and went northwest.

About fifty ‘li’s later the group of heroes stopped at a valley to take a rest and eat. Yang Xiao had already prepared dried provisions, dried meat and wine; nothing was lacking. They were talking about the rescue operation they had just undergone and they all agreed that Zhang Wuji and Fan Yao were in charge of the entire battle and the rescue operation.

On the side Zhou Zhiruo and the Emei disciples were cremating Mijue Shitai’s body. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Song Yuanqiao, Zhang Wuji, and the rest of them, one by one, offered their last respect. Mijue Shitai was a great hero; although her temperament was peculiar she had always upheld chivalry and justice. Her character was imposing; there was no one in the Wulin world who did not respect her. The Emei disciples cried and wept loudly, the rest of the people were also mournful.

In a loud and clear voice Reverend Kong Wen said, “The

dead cannot go back to live. The heroes of Emei must carry on the will Shitai had left behind; hence although Shitai died, she will also live. This time we fell under evil people's poisonous hands; everybody suffered a great defeat. Even our own Sect's Kong Xing Shidi [martial (younger) brother] had died under the Tartars' hands. This debt must be settled, but as how we are going to do this, we need to discuss it further."

Reverend Kong Zhi said, "Initially the Six Major Sects of the Central Plains and the Ming Cult are enemies to each other; but Zhang Jiaozhu has forgotten this animosity and lent a hand to rescue us. This way the enmity between us is to be forever eradicated. From now on we are of one heart and mind, driving the invaders together."

Everybody voiced their agreement at once. However, speaking of revenge, each sect's opinion differed with one another; it was difficult to reach decision. Finally Kong Wen said, "We cannot decide on this matter, let us take a rest for several days, and then separately go back to our places. Someday when we are ready to launch a large attack of vengeance, then we will slowly talk it over." Everybody nodded their heads in approval.

Zhang Wuji said, "Now that this important matter is done, I have some personal business I have to attend; I need to return to Dadou. Hereby I bid everybody farewell. Later on we will work hand in hand, fighting the Tartars to the death together."

Everybody raised their voices together, "We will work hand in hand, fighting the Tartars to the death together." Their shouts shook the sky, the valley reverberated with their cry; and then they send Zhang Wuji off to the mouth of the valley. Zhang Wuji raised his hands in salute and said

goodbye.

“Jiaozhu,” Yang Xiao said, “The heroes of the world look up on you; you have to take a really good care of yourself in everything.”

“Xiongdi [brother] will remember that,” Zhang Wuji said. Mounting his horse he galloped to the south.

End of Chapter 27.

Chapter 28 - Broken Kindness, Lost Friendship, Purple Robed King

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a black light flashed, three weapons were cut down. Among the five people, four were cut off right on their chests, becoming eight pieces, which scattered to all directions, falling off the hill. Only Zheng Zhanglao survived with his right arm cut off, he fell on the ground. They saw Xie Xun's hand was holding a deep black saber, precisely what was known as 'the most revered in the Wulin world, the Tulong Saber.

When he was nearing the Dadou, Zhang Wuji thought that with the uproar at the Wan An Temple the previous night, a lot of the warriors working for the Prince of Ruyang would certainly recognize his face; hence it would be inconvenient for him to enter the city as he was. Thereupon he stopped by a farmer's house along the way to buy a set of old peasant clothes. He changed his clothes and wore a bamboo hat; he also blackened his face and hands using some soot and mud before he finally entered the city.

He returned toward the inn he was staying at the western side of the city, but did not enter the inn right away. He went around looking everywhere, and after ensuring that he saw nothing unusual he went into his room quick as a flash.

Xiao Zhao was sitting by the window; her hands were busy with needle and thread. She was startled to see someone enter the room; but her face broke into joyous smile just like a blooming flower in the spring after recognizing him. "Gongzi ye [young master], I thought it was a farmer breaking into the wrong room; turned out it was you," she said with a laugh.

Zhang Wuji also laughed. "What are you doing?" he asked, "Aren't you lonely?"

Xiao Zhao blushed; immediately she hid the clothes she was sewing behind her back. "I am learning to sew, but it is so bad," she said bashfully. Stuffing the clothes underneath her pillow, she rose up to pour some tea for Zhang Wuji. Seeing his black face she laughed and said, "Aren't you going to wash your face?"

"I put this on purpose," Zhang Wuji smiled, "I can't take it out yet." He took the teacup while pondering in his heart, "Miss Zhao wanted me to come with her fetching the Tulong

Saber. As a real man I have to live up to my promise; I can't break it. Besides, I also want to take Yifu [foster father] to return to the 'zhong tu' [mainland, lit. middle/central earth]. Yifu was afraid that he made too many enemies in the 'zhong yuan' [Central Plains]; now that he is blind, he won't be able to deal with them. But right now the warriors of the Wulin world are united to fight the invaders; certainly personal grudges can be resolved. As long as he is with me, nobody will be able to harm a single hair of his head. The wind and the waves of the ocean are dangerous; this child Xiao Zhao cannot come with us. Mmm, I got it. I can ask Miss Zhao to settle Xiao Zhao in the Palace; it is certainly a lot safer than any other places."

Seeing him suddenly smile, Xiao Zhao asked, "Gongzi, what are you thinking?"

"I am going to a far, far away place," Zhang Wuji said, "It is not safe to take you along. I am thinking of taking you to a place where you can stay temporarily."

Xiao Zhao's face changed. "Gongzi ye," she said, "I am going with you. Xiao Zhao must attend to your need everyday."

"This is for your own good," Zhang Wuji tried to persuade her; "The place I am going is too far and too dangerous. I don't know when I am coming back."

Xiao Zhao said, "Inside that cave on the Brightness Peak I had made a resolution; wherever you go, I am going with you. Only if you kill me then you can get rid of me. Am I that disgusting that you do not want to be with me?"

"No, no," Zhang Wuji said, "You know I like you very much, but I don't want you to brave an unnecessary danger. As

soon as I return, I'll immediately look for you."

Xiao Zhao shook her head, "As long as I am with you, I don't mind any danger. Gongzi, take me with you!"

Zhang Wuji grasped Xiao Zhao's hands and said, "Xiao Zhao, I am not going to lie to you; I have made a promise to Miss Zhao that I am going to accompany her overseas. On the ocean, the waves are so high that they reach the sky. I have to go since I don't have any choice, but for you, what good is it for you to brave this mighty danger?"

Xiao Zhao's face turned red, "You are going with Miss Zhao, I have more reasons to go with you." While saying this, she was so worried that tears welled up in her eyes.

"Why do you have more reasons to go with me?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"That Miss Zhao is so evil," Xiao Zhao said, "Nobody could guess what she is going to do to you. If I am with you, I can look after you."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "Could it be that this young girl have a deep feeling toward me?" he thought in his heart. Hearing the sincerity in her words his heart welled up with gratitude. He smiled and said, "All right, I'll take you with me. But if you get seasick on the boat, you are not allowed to complain."

Xiao Zhao was very happy; she gave her promise repeatedly. She said, "If I make you mad and you are not happy with me, you can toss me to the sea to feed the fish!"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "How can I bear to part with you?"

Although the two of them had known each other for quite a while, and sometimes had to share the same room due to the inconveniences of traveling, Xiao Zhao had always taken the position of a servant, and Zhang Wuji had never teased her or said anything inappropriate to her. Now that he blurted out, 'How can I bear to part with you?' he realized that he had made an indiscreet remark; he could not help blushing and turned his head around to look out the window, yet Xiao Zhao actually sighed and sat by the bed side.

"Why do you sigh?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"Actually, there are many people you cannot bear to part with," Xiao Zhao replied, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou, Ruyang Palace's Junzhu Niang-niang [princess; 'niang-niang' can also mean 'empress']; I don't know how many more. How can you be concerned over a little girl like me?"

Zhang Wuji stood up in front of her and said, "Xiao Zhao, you are always good to me. Do you think I don't know it? Do you think I am such an ungrateful man that I do not know good from bad?" He said these things with a serious face, showing her his earnestness.

Xiao Zhao was shy and happy at the same time. Lowering her head she said, "I am not asking you to treat me in a special way. As long as you allow me to be with you forever; to be your servant, to take care of you, I will be satisfied. You haven't slept for the whole night, you must be very tired. Why don't you lie on the bed and take some rest?" While saying that she lifted the blanket from the bed to let him lie down; and then she returned to her seat by the window, resuming her sewing.

While closing his eyes Zhang Wuji could still hear the occasional clinking noise of the iron chain on her hand; he felt safe and peaceful. Not too long afterwards he fell sound asleep.

Zhang Wuji slept until dusk. He woke up and ate a bowl of noodles. "Xiao Zhao," he said, "Let me take you to see Miss Zhao, we can borrow her Yitian Sword to cut the iron shackle on your hands and feet."

Two people went out to the street. They saw Mongolian soldiers on horsebacks everywhere. It seemed like the security level was at its highest after the fire at the Ruyang Palace and the big trouble in the Wan An Temple the previous night. As two people heard the hoof beats, they shrank back and hid behind the corner of a house to avoid being seen by the soldiers. They arrived at the small wine shop without taking too much time.

Zhang Wuji took Xiao Zhao and entered in pushing the door open. He saw Zhao Min was drinking wine, she was sitting on the same table as on the previous night. As she saw them she stood up and smiled, "Zhang Gongzi is truly a trustworthy man," she said.

Zhang Wuji noticed her expression was as usual, as if last night's trouble had nothing to do with her at all; he mused, "This girl is truly extraordinary; I sent someone to kill her father's beloved concubine and released the masters of the Six Major Sects whom she painstakingly captured after a meticulous plan. She should be very angry, yet she looks like nothing happened. I wonder how she is going to vent up her anger."

He saw the table was already set with two sets of chopsticks and cups just like last night. He bowed slightly and took a

seat. Xiao Zhao stood a bit farther away, taking the position of a servant.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Miss Zhao, about last night, I offended you a lot. Please forgive me."

Zhao Min said with a smile, "That Concubine Han of my father was bewitchingly enchanting. I was repugnant. My Mama praised you as a smart and competent man."

Zhang Wuji was stunned; her reaction was truly beyond his anticipation.

Zhao Min also said, "I am fine with you rescuing those people too. They were not willing to surrender anyway, so what the use of keeping them here? Now that you have rescued them, everybody must be very grateful to you. Currently in the Wulin world of the Central Plains nobody surpasses you in term of power and prestige. Zhang Gongzi, let me offer you a toast!" With a soft laugh she raised her cup.

Right at this moment the door was pushed open and someone came in; it was Fan Yao. He went to Zhang Wuji first to pay his respect; and then he turned toward Zhao Min and bowed respectfully to her. "Junzhu," he said, "Ku Toutuo is taking his leave from you."

Zhao Min ignored his greeting; "Ku Dashi," she said in a cold voice, "You have hidden the truth from me really good. This time Junzhu has stumbled big time."

Fan Yao stood straight up, he boldly said, "Ku Toutuo's surname is Fan, first name Yao; the Guangming Youshi [The Right Emissary of the Brightness] of the Ming Cult. Because the royal government is in enmity with the Ming Cult, I

entered the Ruyang Palace to spy on the enemy. I have received a lot of Junzhu's kindness; thereupon I come today to bid you farewell."

Zhao Min remained to be cold; she said, "If you want to go, just go. What's the purpose of this propriety?"

"A real man always handles matters in the open," Fan Yao said, "From this day on, I am Junzhu's enemy. If I do not let Junzhu know this, I am betraying Junzhu's kind treatment in the past."

Zhao Min turned toward Zhang Wuji and asked, "What is it that you have, that each one of your subordinates is willing to die for you?"

To which Zhang Wuji replied, "We are doing it for our country and our people, for chivalry, for loyalty and self-sacrifice. Fan Youshi and I did not know each other, yet we feel like old friends; we are devoted to each other, lifting high this 'yi4' [justice/righteousness] character."

Fan Yao laughed aloud and said, "Jiaozhu's words truly express what is in subordinate's heart. Jiaozhu, you have to be really careful; this Junzhu Niang-niang is young, but her heart is cruel and merciless, she is truly an extraordinary woman. You have too kind of a heart; you must never let her swindle you."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I will not dare to be careless."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Ku Dashi, thank you for your compliment."

Fan Yao turned around to leave the inn. When he walked pass Xiao Zhao, he suddenly stopped dead on his track. His

face showed a big shock, as if he suddenly saw a ghost or a demon. "You ... you ..." he stammered.

"What?" Xiao Zhao asked.

Fan Yao stared blankly at her for half a day before he finally said, "No ... it can't be ... I thought you are someone else." Heaving a deep sigh he pushed the door and left; his face looked so gloomy. "Looks alike, looks alike," he softly mumbled.

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked at each other in bewilderment; they wondered to whom Xiao Zhao might look alike.

Suddenly they heard the sound of whistle in the distant; three long and two short whistles, sharp and shrill whistles. Zhang Wuji was startled; he remembered it was the signal of Emei Pai disciple whenever they were trying to contact their fellow martial brothers or sisters. In the Western Region he had met Miejue Shitai and the others, and he heard this exact same signal back then. "Why do the Emei Pai's disciples return to Dadou [lit. grand capital, the present day Beijing]? Could it be that they are dealing with some enemies?" he pondered in his heart.

"That is Emei Pai's signal," Zhao Min said, "Looks like they have an urgent matter. Let us go and take a look, shall we?"

Zhang Wuji was surprised, "How do you know?" he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and said, "In the Western Region I followed them for four days and four nights before I finally managed to capture Miejue Shitai. Why wouldn't I know?"

"All right, let us go and take a look," Zhang Wuji said, "Miss

Zhao, I have a favor I'd like to ask. Can I borrow your Yitian Sword for a moment?"

Zhao Min laughed. "I have not borrowed the Tulong Saber, you want to borrow the Yitian Sword first. You do have an astute business skill," she said. Loosening the precious sword from her waist she handed it over to him.

Zhang Wuji took the sword. Drawing the sword from its sheath he called, "Xiao Zhao, come over here."

Xiao Zhao walked over. Zhang Wuji brandished the Sword; with some light 'swish, swish, swish' sounds the iron chain on Xiao Zhao's hands and feet fell clanking down on the ground.

Xiao Zhao bowed down and said, "Many thanks Gongzi, many thanks Junzhu."

Zhao Min smiled. "What a beautiful young girl," she said, "Your Jiaozhu must be very fond of you."

Xiao Zhao blushed profusely; but her eyes sparkled with joy.

Zhang Wuji returned the sword into its sheathe and handed it back to Zhao Min. He heard the Emei Pai's signal sound was moving toward the northeast. "Let's go," he said.

Zhao Min fished out a silver coin from her pocket and threw it on the table; then she dashed out of the inn.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Xiao Zhao could not keep up; he pulled her hand with his right hand, while with his left he pushed her waist, keeping a distance between their bodies. They followed Zhao Min closely. But after only a dozen of 'zhang's or so, he felt Xiao Zhao's body was very light; her footsteps were also very fast. He felt strange, so he took

away the strength from his hands; yet Xiao Zhao was still able to run side-by-side with him, she did not show any sign of lagging behind at all. Zhang Wuji did not utilize his 'qing gong' [lightness skill] to the fullest, but his feet were moving very fast; yet to his surprise Xiao Zhao was able to match his speed.

In an instant Zhao Min had already crossed several desolate alleys and arrived at an empty yard enclosed in a partly collapsed wall. Zhang Wuji heard a faint noise of some women arguing inside the enclosure. Knowing that the Emei Pai's disciples were on the yard, he pulled Xiao Zhao's hand and took her crouching behind the wall, silently hiding in the darkness. He noticed long grass everywhere on the yard; it seemed like it was an abandoned garden. Zhao Min followed them hiding in the grass.

There was a broken down pavilion on the north corner of the garden; in this pavilion there were about twenty or so shadows of people sitting or standing. One female voice was heard, "You are our school's youngest disciple; based on either in knowledge or martial arts, you are still unworthy to be our Sect Leader ..."

Zhang Wuji recognized this voice as belonged to Ding Minjun. He crawled among the thick patch of long grass toward within a few 'zhang's of the pavilion to get a better view. That night the starlight was dim, all he could see was dark shadows. Focusing his attention, he could see there were male and female shadows in the pavilion; they were all Emei Pai's disciples. Other than Ding Minjun, it looked like the rest of Mijue Shitai's senior disciples were all present. To the left stood a slender woman with her dark green long skirt reaching the ground, it was Zhou Zhiruo. Hearing Ding Minjun talked nonstop with an excited voice, 'You said this, you said that ...' Zhou Zhiruo calmly said, "What Ding Shijie

[martial (older) sister] said was right; Xiao Mei [little/young sister] is the youngest disciple of our school. Whether in term of qualifications and records of service, martial arts, talent, or personal character, none is sufficient to qualify me as the Sect Leader. When Shifu assigned this heavy responsibility to me, Xiao Mei has repeatedly declined wholeheartedly; but Xian Shi [late/departed teacher] was severely adamant, telling Xiao Mei to make a heavy oath that I will not fail to follow Shifu's injunction."

Jing Xuan, a senior Emei disciple said, "Shifu was very wise; if she appointed Zhou Shimei [martial (younger) sister] to be our next Sect Leader, then she must have had a profound meaning. All of us have received Shifu's kindness. It is just proper for us to receive and obey her will by supporting Zhou Shimei with one heart, and thus brighten our Sect's martial arts' prestige."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "Jing Xuan Shijie said that Shifu must have had a profound meaning; this 'profound meaning' was well-said. When we were on the Pagoda, as well as when we were on the ground, didn't we all hear Ku Toutuo and He Biweng shouting loudly? Who are Zhou Shimei's parents? Why did Shifu regard her with special fondness? Haven't you understood?"

Ku Toutuo did tell Lu Zhangke that Mijue Shitai was his old sweetheart, and that Zhou Zhiruo was their daughter. It was simply because he came from a heretical background; he meant those things as a joke, but unexpectedly He Biweng shouted it loud that everybody could hear it. They might not necessarily believe what they heard, but it was also difficult to avoid suspicions. This male-female relationship was a private matter, other people could choose to either believe or not believe, but Mijue Shitai did indeed treat Zhou Zhiruo with special attention, which was puzzling to the rest of the disciples. Therefore, this 'daughter' stuff was the most

logical explanation to them. Listening to Ding Minjun's argument, the disciples were silent.

With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "Ding Shijie, if you cannot accept Xiao Mei as the Sect Leader, just say so. You are talking nonsense, ruining Shifu's clean lifetime reputation, what did she do to deserve this? Xiao Mei's late father's surname was Zhou, he was a boatman along the Han Shui [River Han]; he did not know any martial arts at all. My late mother was from the Xue household, an aristocratic family from Xiangyang. After the City of Xiangyang fell down, they fled to the south to escape calamity, they lost their fortune and she finally married my late father. Over Wudang Pai's Zhang Zhenren's [lit. real/true man, a respectable term to address a Taoist priest] recommendation, Xiao Mei became Emei disciple. I have never met Shifu before then. You have received Shifu's great kindness. Today Xian Shi returned to the western sky [i.e. died], yet you dared to say such thing. This ... this ..." Speaking to this point her voice cracked and teardrops started to fall down her cheeks like rain, she was not able to continue.

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "You are only thinking of becoming our school's Sect Leader, you have not received our school's recognition, your position is not clear yet, but you have already flaunted your authority by accusing me. What 'ruining Shifu's lifetime clean reputation'? What 'accusing her of doing something to deserve anything'? You want to control me, don't you? Let me ask you this: if you have received Shifu's order to become the next Sect Leader, then you should go back to Emei soon. Shifu passed away, our school's affair is not only numerous, but complicated as well; every thing is in need of the Sect Leader's attention. But you, without consulting anybody else, suddenly returned to Dadou alone; may I ask why?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Xiao Mei has received an extremely urgent assignment from Shifu; which left me no choice but to return to Dadou."

"What assignment is that?" Ding Minjun asked, "Here we are all of the same school, there is no outsiders present. You may tell us clearly."

"It is our Sect's greatest secret," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Nobody else is privileged enough to hear it other than the Sect Leader."

"Humph, humph!" Ding Minjun sneered, "You keep pushing this 'Sect Leader' business but you can't deceive me. Let me ask you: our Sect's enmity with the Devil Cult is as deep as the ocean; many of our Sect's disciples died under the hands of the Devil Cult disciples, while the Devil Cult's disciples who died under Shifu's Yitian Sword is even more numerous. Shifu died because she was not willing to receive any kindness from that Devil Cult's Jiaozhu. That being the case, Shifu's body has not turned cold yet, why did you stealthily seek that pervert little thief surnamed Zhang of the Devil Cult, that Jiaozhu, the leader of the devils?"

Hearing the last few sentences Zhang Wuji's body shook; but then he felt a soft hand reaching out to his left cheek, gently traced his face down with two fingers. It was Zhao Min who was by his side, tracing her fingers on him to shame him. Zhang Wuji's face turned completely red; he thought, "Was Miss Zhou really looking for me?"

He heard Zhou Zhiruo stammer, "You ... you are talking nonsense ..."

"You still want to deny it?" Ding Minjun shouted, "You told

everybody to return to Emei first. We asked you why you must return to Dadou, and you gave us an indistinct answer; you were not willing to tell us. We felt something was not right, so we followed you behind. You asked your father Ku Toutuo of this pervert little thief's whereabouts. Do you think we don't know it? And then you went to that inn looking for that pervert little thief. Do you think we don't know it?"

Almost in every other sentence in her speech she mentioned 'pervert little thief' and although Zhang Wuji was not temperamental, he was very angry nonetheless. Before he could do anything, again Zhou Min blew a breath to his neck to tease him.

Ding Minjun continued, "It certainly is not other people's business to whom you like to speak, with whom you want to be intimate, but this pervert little thief surnamed Zhang is the archenemy of our Sect. Last night when we escaped from Dadou, why did you keep looking at him along the way? Wherever he went, your eyes had never left him. I did not make up this story; all our fellow martial brothers and sisters witnessed it with their own eyes. That day on the Brightness Peak, Xian Shi told you to stab him with your sword. Unexpectedly he neither dodged nor evaded, but he cast his alluring glance at you instead; you made eyes with him in response and gently pricked him just for show. With the Yitian Sword in your hand, why did he not die? Who would believe there isn't something fishy going on here?"

Zhou Zhiruo broke up in tears. "Who made eyes with him?" she sobbed, "Your vicious words are falsely accusing others."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "My words are vicious; but what about you? Aren't you afraid others may say ugly words of your unsightly conduct? Are your words pleasant to the ears? Humph, how did you ask that innkeeper a while

ago? ‘Mister Innkeeper, is there any guest by the surname Zhang in here? Mmm, he is about twenty, rather tall. Perhaps he did not use the surname Zhang, but some other family name?’”

She talked slowly with a sharp throaty voice, imitating Zhou Zhiruo’s slow intonation; with an exaggerated action imitating a demonic seductress, absolutely horrifying those who heard her. Zhang Wuji was very mad; he thought this Ding Minjun was Emei Pai’s most sly and nasty disciple. The gentle and soft-spoken Zhou Zhiruo was definitely not her match. But he could not come out to stand for her; because first of all it was Emei Pai’s internal affair, it was inappropriate for outsiders to butt in, second, he would only make Zhou Zhiruo’s situation more disadvantageous. In the end, he could only see Zhou Zhiruo was cornered without him able to render any help.

The majority of the Emei Pai disciples were originally submitting to their Shifu’s wish; they were ready to support Zhou Zhiruo as the new Sect Leader. But listening to Ding Minjun’s fiery argument, which was actually logical and reasonable, they thought, “Shifu’s hatred to the Devil Cult was so deep. Zhou Shimei and that Devil Cult’s Jiaozhu have nothing in common. Supposed she is selling our Sect to the Devil Cult, how can that be good?”

Ding Minjun continued, “Zhou Shimei, you entered Shifu’s school by Wudang’s Zhang Zhenren’s recommendation. That Devil Cult’s pervert little thief is Wudang’s Zhang Wuxia’s [Fifth Hero Zhang] son. Nobody knows the details to what kind of intricate plot you are scheming.” Raising her sharp voice again she said, “Martial brothers and sisters, even though Shifu left us her will that Zhou Shimei is to take over the Sect Leader position, surely she could not know that while her skeleton is not yet cold, this new Sect Leader

would look for the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu to nurture their personal relationship. This is a grave matter concerning the life or death, the prosperity or decline of our Sect. If Xian Shi were here tonight, she would definitely appoint another Sect Leader. Shifu's desire was certainly the bright future of our Sect, not its destruction under the Devil Cult's hands. In Xiao Mei's opinion, we must lift high Xian Shi's lifelong desire; we will respectfully ask Zhou Shimei to hand over the Iron Ring, the Sect Leadership's token of authority. And then we will nominate someone else with both ability and integrity, a senior martial sister whose martial art can be an example to our fellow disciples, to take the position of our school's Sect Leader."

As she finished her oration, some six, seven disciples voiced their agreement.

Zhou Zhiruo said, "I have received Xian Shi's order to take over this school's Sect Leader position; in no way I can hand over this Iron Ring. In all honesty, I did not want to become the Sect Leader; but I have made a heavy oath in front of her. I simply cannot ... simply cannot betray her trust." Her voice was so weak that some disciples could not hear clearly what she was saying. They could not restrain from inwardly shaking their heads.

In a stern voice Ding Minjun said, "This Iron Ring, you must hand it over, whether you want it or not! One of our school's strictest rules is prohibition against deceiving masters and ancestors; the other is strict abstention against immorality and shameless act. You have violated these two most important rules; how can you even be the disciple of our school?"

Zhao Min put her lips close to Zhang Wuji's ears and in a very low voice said, "Your Miss Zhou is done with! You call

me 'good elder sister', I will come out to her rescue."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he knew this girl was shrewd, certainly she could think of some way to get Zhou Zhiruo out of trouble. But she was a few years younger than he, so if he called her 'good elder sister', he thought it was just too corny. He hesitated and did not open his mouth.

"You want to call or not, it's up to you," Zhao Min said, "I'm leaving."

Zhang Wuji had no choice; he whispered on her ear, "Good elder sister!"

Zhao Min stifled her laughter. She was about to stand up and come out when the people in the pavilion had already cried out in alarm.

"Who's there?" Ding Minjun shouted, "Hiding in the dark eavesdropping to other people in here?"

From outside the wall came several coughing noises, a clear and crisp female voice was heard, "What are you, Emei Pai people, doing in the middle of the night, stealthily gathered in here?" The sound of flapping clothes swept by and there were two more people standing outside the pavilion.

These two people were facing the moon. Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly. One was a frail hunchback old lady, with a walking stick in her hand; it was none other than Jin Hua Popo [Golden Flower Granny]. The other was a young lady with a graceful figure, but her face was strangely ugly; it was Yin Yewang's daughter, Zhang Wuji's own cousin Zhu'Er [Spider Kid] Yin Li.

Zhu'Er was captured by Wei Yixiao the other day; but before

he reached the Brightness Peak the cold poison in his body flared-up. He did not want to suck her blood, so finally he collapsed to the ground. Afterwards he was rescued by Zhou Dian, but by the time he tried to find Zhu'Er, she was nowhere to be found. Ever since Zhang Wuji argued with her, he had never forgotten her. He was pleasantly surprised to unexpectedly see her here that he almost opened up his mouth to call her.

"Jin Hua Popo, what are you doing here?" Ding Minjun coldly asked.

"Where is your Shifu?" Jin Hua Popo asked her back.

"Xian Shi passed away yesterday," Ding Minjun said, "You have eavesdropped outside the wall for a while, why are you still pretending?"

"Ah, Mijue Shitai has passed away!" Jin Hua Popo exclaimed in a weak voice, "How did she die? Why didn't she wait for me? Ay, ay, what a pity, what a pity ..." Before finished speaking, she had already bent down and was coughing incessantly.

Zhu'Er gently patted her back. She sneered toward Ding Minjun and said, "Who eavesdrops on your conversations? Popo and I are simply passing by; we heard someone was mumbling nonstop. I recognized your voice, so we stopped by to take a look. Popo asked you, have you not heard? How did your Shifu die?"

Ding Minjun indignantly said, "What business is it of yours? Why do you expect me to answer you?"

Jin Hua Popo slowly exhaled, she calmly said, "In all my life dealing with other people, I only suffered defeat one time

under your Shifu's hands. It was not because her martial art was better than mine, but because the sharpness of the Yitian Sword. These past several years I have been wandering everywhere, trying to find a comparably sharp weapon so that I can challenge your Shifu once again. Finally my wandering to the end of the world has not been in vain; an old acquaintance has agreed to let me use a precious saber of his. I heard Emei Pai people were imprisoned at the Wan An Temple by the royal government. I had a thought of rescuing your Shifu, so that we can decide whose skill is better. Who would have thought that as I arrived today, the Wan An Temple has been reduced to rubble. Ay! This is fate; for the rest of her life Jin Hua Popo will not be able to wash away the shame of this defeat. Mie jue Shitai, oh, Mie jue Shitai, can't you wait just one and a half day later to die?"

Ding Minjun said, "If Shifu were still alive, you will certainly suffer another defeat. So you'd better not have any dream ..." Suddenly 'slap, slap, slap, slap' four times, loud and clear; Ding Minjun's head spun and she faltered, since Jin Hua Popo had slapped her on the face four times, left and right.

This old granny looked frail, as if she could not support her own weight; she was also coughing repeatedly, but who would have thought that her hand could move in an unbelievable speed with a very weird palm technique. These four palm strikes were so fast that Ding Minjun did not have the slightest idea they were coming, let alone try to evade them. She was separated about two 'zhang's [about 20 feet, close to 7m] away from Ding Minjun, yet she was able to slap her and go back to her original position like a ghost.

Ding Minjun was angry; she drew her sword and pointing it toward Jin Hua Popo she said, "Old beggar granny, are you

always this impatient?"

Jin Hua Popo ignored her insult, she also did not seem to see the sword in her hand, but slowly said, "How did your Shifu die?" Her voice was full of sorrow, as if she was completely discouraged.

The tip of Ding Minjun's sword was actually less than three feet away from Jin Hua Popo's chest, but in the end she did not have the courage to thrust it in. "Old beggar granny," she cursed, "Why do you expect me to answer you?"

Jin Hua Popo heaved a deep sigh and lamented, "Miejue Shitai, you were a hero; you can be considered as the Wulin world's outstanding character. It's a pity that you died. Don't you have any decent disciple to take over the Sect Leader position?"

Jing Xuan Shitai stepped forward; joining her palms in greeting she said, "Pin ni [lit. impoverished nun] Jing Xuan, paying my respect to Popo. Before her death Xian Shi had appointed Zhou Zhiruo, Zhou Shimei to take over the Sect Leadership position. Only in our Sect there are certain numbers of fellow disciples who have not submitted to that decision yet. Xian Shi has died; it would be difficult to fulfill Popo's wish. Since that is the case, what else can we say? Our school's Sect Leader has not been decided; we cannot make any appointment with Popo. But Emei is a great Sect of the Wulin world; in no way would we degrade Xian Shi's prestige. We will listen to whatever instruction Popo have; in the future our Sect Leader, according to the rule of the Wulin world, will deal with you. But if Popo, relying on your seniority, want to take an unfair advantage of us, although Emei Pai has just suffered a great calamity, we will fight with you until our blood is poured over this abandoned garden, until the very last of us die."

She was speaking boldly, yet without any trace of arrogance or submissiveness; making Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min applauding silently.

Jin Hua Popo's eyes flickered. "Turns out before she died, Zun Shi [lit. revered master] had appointed her successor, the new Sect Leader. That's wonderful! Which one? May I see her?" she said. Her manner of speaking was a lot more polite than when she talked with Ding Minjun.

Zhou Zhiruo stepped forward and saluted. "Popo, may you be blessed! Emei Pai's fourth generation Sect Leader Zhou Zhiruo wishes Popo well."

"Shameless!" Ding Minjun bellowed, "Proclaiming yourself as the Emei Pai's fourth generation Sect Leader."

Zhu'Er sneered. "This Zhou Jiejie [elder sister Zhou] is a good person; I have received her loving care in the western region. If she is not fit to become the Sect Leader, do you think you are? You dare to blubber your big mouth in front of Popo; you make me want to slap your ugly face!"

Ding Minjun was angry. 'Swish!' her sword stabbed toward Zhu'Er. Zhu'Er leaned sideways to evade, her palm struck toward Ding Minjun's face. Her movement was exactly the same as Jin Hua Popo's, but her speed was far inferior than Popo's. Ding Minjun ducked to avoid the strike, but her sword also missed its target.

Jin Hua Popo said with a smile, "Girl, I have taught you many, many times, but you have not mastered such an easy move. Watch carefully!" Her right palm moved, conveniently slapped Ding Minjun's left cheek. She flipped her palm and slapped her right cheek. Then her palm returned and

slapped her left cheek, flipped over and slapped her right cheek again. These four palm strikes were very distinct; everybody could see them clearly. But Ding Minjun felt as if her body was enveloped with a great power that her limbs were completely unmovable, so her cheeks were slapped four times without her having any strength to block or evade. Fortunately, Jin Hua Popo held up her strength that Ding Minjun did not suffer any serious injury.

Zhu'Er smiled and said, "Popo, I have mastered your palm technique, but I don't have the kind of power you do. Let me try again!"

Ding Minjun was still bound by Jin Hua Popo's internal strength; she saw Zhu'Er's palm was about to strike her face. In her fury she almost passed out. Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo moved sideways; stretching her left hand she blocked Zhu'Er's palm and said, "Jiejie [elder sister], hold on!" Turning her head toward Jin Hua Popo she said, "Popo, my Shijie Jing Xuan has said it clearly; although our martial art skills are not as exquisite as Popo's, we will not let ourselves to be bullied by others."

Jin Hua Popo smiled and said, "This surnamed Ding woman's mouth is too sharp; she kept on saying she won't submit to your leadership, yet you still stand up for her?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "The internal affair of our school is not any outsider's business. Xiao Nuzi [lit. young woman] has received Xian Shi's order. Although my skill is too shallow, I will not let any outsider to humiliate my fellow disciple."

Jin Hua Popo smiled. "Good, good, good!" she said 'good' three times, then broke up in coughing again. Zhu'Er immediately handed a pill to her. Jin Hua Popo took it, while gasping heavily. With a sudden movement both of her palms

reached out; one palm pressing Zhou Zhiruo's chest, the other pressing her back, so that all Zhou Zhiruo's fatal acupoints were covered by her palms. As soon as she pressed her palms, Zhou Zhiruo's life would be gone.

It was a very strange move. Although Zhou Zhiruo had not learned martial art for a long time, she had mastered about 30% of Mijue Shitai's skill, yet she was baffled and was rendered speechless by this strange move that held her in between the opponent's palms, she was shocked and scared, and it showed on her face.

"Miss Zhou," in a gloomy voice Jin Hua Popo said, "As the Sect Leader, your skill is really shoddy. I wonder if Zun Shi did really assign this heavy responsibility to a pampered pretty young girl like you. I'll say you are merely boasting."

Zhou Zhiruo made up her mind; she thought it in her heart, "If she exerted her strength right now, my arteries would be shaken and immediately broken, then I will die on the spot. But how can I degrade Shifu's power and prestige?" As soon as she remembered her Shifu, her courage escalated a hundred folds; lifting her right hand high she said, "This is Emei Pai's Iron Ring of the Sect Leader; Xian Shi has personally put it on my finger. How can it be a fake?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed; she said, "Just now your Shijie said that Emei is a major sect in the Wulin world. She was right, but relying on your meager skill, can you be the Wulin world great Sect's Sect Leader? I think you'd better be an obedient child and listen to what I have to say."

"Jin Hua Popo," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Although Xian Shi has already died, Emei Pai did not die with her. I have fallen under your hands, so if you want to kill me you can just kill me; but if you want to force me to submit to your desire, I

suggest you give up that idea. Our Sect was fallen into the royal government's sinister plot and we were imprisoned in the Pagoda; but did you see any of us surrender? Zhou Zhiruo is merely a young and feeble woman, yet I have accepted the heavy responsibility assigned to me. I know it is very difficult, so early on I have already disregarded my own life and death."

Zhang Wuji saw the vital acupoints on her back were threatened by Jin Hua Popo; her life was hanging on a thread of hair, yet she was stubbornly standing up. He was afraid that in her anger Jin Hua Popo would take her life. He realized the situation was desperate; he wanted to jump out to rescue her. Zhao Min had already guessed his intention; she grabbed his right arm while lightly shaking her head, meaning that he should not act recklessly.

They heard Jin Hua Popo laugh aloud and say, "Miejue Shitai did not make a wrong decision. This young Sect Leader's martial art skill is weak, but her character is actually very strong. Hmm, that's right, that's right, insufficient martial art can be learned, river and mountain can be changed, but character is difficult to be altered."

Actually, right at that moment Zhou Zhiruo was scared to death, only she remembered about how her Shifu just before her death had placed her great trust on her, so she summoned all her courage and stood unyieldingly upright.

The other Emei disciples were originally looking down upon Zhou Zhiruo, but at this moment they saw her disregarding personal dislike bravely stepping forward to protect Ding Minjun, and then she did not demean their school prestige at all even under a powerful enemy's threat, feelings of respect and admiration started to grow in their hearts.

Jing Xuan brandished her sword and let out some signal whistles; the Emei disciples moved at once, with weapons in their hands they dispersed surrounding the pavilion.

“What is it?” Jin Hua Popo smiled and asked.

Jing Xuan said, “Popo captures Emei’s Pai Leader, what do you want?”

Jin Hua Popo coughed several times and said, “You want to achieve victory by sheer numbers? Hey, hey, will ten times your number make any difference in Jin Hua Popo’s eyes?”

Abruptly she let Zhou Zhiruo go, and then her body swayed and dashed straight toward Jing Xuan. Her two fingers moved toward Jing Xuan’s eyes as if she wanted to dig her eyes out. Jing Xuan hastily waved her sword trying to chop her arm. Suddenly she heard a ‘hey’ noise, followed by a grunt; one of her Shimei standing close to her had fallen down. Turned out that when Jin Hua Popo faked an attack to Jing Xuan, her left foot actually kicked the acupoint on the waist of an Emei female disciple.

Her shadow dashed around the pavilion, her sleeves fluttered in the air, occasional coughs were heard, Emei disciples thrust their swords, but nobody was able to stab her; on the contrary, seven male and female disciples fell down because their acupoints were sealed. Her acupoint sealing technique was very strange; those who were hit were screaming from pain. In a short moment the garden was full of sad and shrill screams, rending the hearts of those who heard them.

Jin Hua Popo clapped her hands and returned to the pavilion. “Miss Zhou,” she said, “How is Jin Hua Popo’s martial art compared to your Emei Pai’s?”

“Our Sect’s martial art is certainly better than Popo’s,” Zhou Zhiruo replied, “You were defeated by my Xian Shi’s sword the other day; have you forgotten?”

Jin Hua Popo was furious, “The Old Nun Miejue was using a precious sword; that doesn’t count!” she said.

“Popo, let’s be honest,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “If Xian Shi and you fight barehanded, who do you think will win?”

Jin Hua Popo was silent for half a day before answering, “I don’t know. I came to Dadou today to find out between your Zun Shi and me, who’s weak and who’s strong. Ay! Miejue Shitai has died, Wulin world lost one of its martial art masters. Someone like her had never been seen in the past, and will never be seen in the future. Henceforth Emei Pai will become weak.”

Those seven disciples were still screaming and wailing, as if they were underlining Jin Hua Popo’s words. Jing Xuan and several other senior disciples tried hard to unseal their acupoints, but their efforts did not show any effect. It looked like they would have to be released by Jin Hua Popo herself.

Zhang Wuji had treated not just a few of Wulin world’s characters who were injured by Jin Hua Popo in the past. He knew this granny was very vicious, a person of her caliber was rare in the Jianghu. He was thinking of coming out and help, but after careful consideration he decided against it. He thought, “If I help Miss Zhou, I will offend Zhu’Er. This cousin of mine has been so good to me; moreover, she is my close relative. How can I favor one and discriminate against the other?”

In the meantime, Jin Hua Popo said, “Miss Zhou, do you

admit defeat?”

Zhou Zhiruo gathered up her courage and said, “Our Sect’s martial art is as deep as the ocean, it can’t be learned in a short time. We are still young. Right now we are inferior to Popo, but our progress in the future will be immeasurable.”

Jin Hua Popo laughed. “Wonderful, wonderful!” she said, “Since that’s the case, Jin Hua Popo is taking my leave now. Just wait until your progress is immeasurable then you can come back and unseal their acupoints.” While saying that she took Zhu’Er’s hand, and turned around to leave.

Zhou Zhiruo realized her fellow disciples were too much in pain; they might not be able to endure another hour and might die from their pain. “Popo, wait a minute!” she hastily said, “Please help my Shijie’s and Shixiong’s [martial (older) sisters and brothers].”

“You want me to help them? That’s easy,” Jin Hua Popo said, “From this day forward, wherever Jin Hua Popo or her disciples go, Emei disciples have to make yourselves scarce.”

Zhou Zhiruo thought, “I have just accepted the Sect Leader responsibility, already I have to face this strong enemy. If I agree to her condition, how can Emei Pai set our feet in the Wulin world? How can I let the demise of Emei Pai to be in my hand?”

Jin Hua Popo saw her hesitation; she laughed and said, “You don’t want Emei Pai’s prestige to fall; that’s fine. Just let me borrow the Yitian Sword then I will help your fellow disciples.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “Our Sect’s master and disciples all fell

into the royal government's evil plot and were held captives on that Pagoda. How can the Yitian Sword still be in our hands?"

Jin Hua Popo had already expected this answer, she knew her chance of borrowing the Sword was only one in ten thousands, yet hearing Zhou Zhiruo say so, her countenance showed disappointment nonetheless. Suddenly in a stern voice she said, "If you want to save Emei Pai's reputation, you cannot save your own life ..." Taking a pill from her bosom she said, "This is the 'duan chang lie xin' [breaking intestines, cracking the heart] poison. You take this, then I'll save your people."

Zhou Zhiruo remembered that her heart was already broken when she received her Shifu's injunction; she said in her heart, "Shifu told me to deceive Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang]; I can't do this. Rather than keep on living with this constant torture, death is a hundred times better; nothing matters anymore." With a trembling hand she took the poison.

"Zhou Shimei, don't eat that!" Jing Xuan shouted.

Zhang Wuji saw the situation was critical; he was ready to jump out and snatch the poison away. Zhao Min hissed into his ear, "Idiot! It's a fake; that is not a poison."

Zhang Wuji was stunned, but Zhou Zhiruo had already swallowed the pill. Jing Xuan and the others shouted and rushed toward Jin Hua Popo, ready to strike.

"Excellent, you have guts!" Jin Hua Popo said, "The poison won't kill you in an hour or two. Miss Zhou, come with me and nicely listen to me. If Lao Po [the old granny] is happy, she might give the antidote to you." Finished speaking she

walked around and slapped and kicked those Emei disciples. Immediately their pain stopped; so their screams stopped as well. Only their limbs were still weak that they would not be able to move for a while.

These people saw with their own eyes that Zhou Zhiruo took the poison to save their lives; they were overwhelmed with gratitude. "Thank you, Sect Leader!" one of them shouted.

Jin Hua Popo pulled Zhou Zhiruo's hand, "Good child," she tenderly said, "Come with me, Popo won't make things difficult for you."

Before she could reply, Zhou Zhiruo felt an enormous power pulling her body and she jumped forward against her own will.

"Zhou Shimei ..." Jing Xuan shouted and rushed forward, trying to block, but suddenly she felt a strong wind from her side, a finger almost touched her. It was Zhu'Er attacking her from the side. Jing Xuan used her left palm to block, but to her surprise Zhu'Er's move was a fake one. 'Slap!' Ding Minjun's face ate her palm. This 'zhi dong da xi' [aim to the east strike to the west] was indeed Jin Hua Popo's technique.

Zhu'Er chuckled and jumped over the wall.

"After them!" Zhang Wuji said. With one hand pulling Zhao Min along and the other carrying Xiao Zhao, he also jumped over the wall.

Jing Xuan and the others were startled to suddenly see three people coming out from the grass. They tried to pursue after them, but how could their 'qing gong' [lightness skill] be compared to Jian Hua Popo and Zhang Wuji? By the time they jumped over the wall, six people had already

disappeared into the darkness.

Zhang Wuji and the others pursued for a dozen of 'zhang's or so. Without slowing down the least bit Jin Hua Popo shouted, "I am surprised Emei Pai disciples have the courage to pursue Jin Hua Popo. Hey, hey, it's amazing!"

"Let our Sect Leader go!" Zhao Min shouted. Her body swayed and she flew several 'zhang's forward. The tip of her Yitian Sword threatening Jin Hua Popo's back. She was using the 'jin ding fu guang' [golden peak like a ray of light], one of Emei's sword techniques; which she learned from an Emei female disciple in the Wan An Temple. It could not be compared to Mie jue Shitai, but it was exquisite nonetheless.

As Jin Hua Popo heard the gust of wind behind her back, she let Zhou Zhiruo go and quickly turned around. Zhao Min flicked her wrist and launched another stance, 'qian feng jing xiu' [a thousand peaks compete to show their elegance].

Jin Hua Popo knew the sword in Zhao Min's hand was the Yitian Sword; she was alarmed yet happy. Stretching out her hand, she tried to snatch the sword away.

Several stances later Jin Hua Popo pressed in front of Zhao Min, her finger was just about to reach Zhao Min's wrist, which was holding the sword; unexpectedly Zhao Min turned her sword around with one of Kunlun Pai's sword techniques, the 'shen tuo jun zu' [divine camel with stallion's feet].

Jin Hua Popo saw Zhao Min was a young girl; she was holding the Yitian Sword, she was also using Emei's sword technique, therefore, she must be an Emei Pai disciple. In order to challenge Mie jue Shitai, Jin Hua Popo had extensively studied Emei's sword techniques for several years. After seeing Zhao Min's several stances, she knew her

internal strength was only mediocre; hence for the next several stances she thought she would understand and able to anticipate her attack. For that reason she pressed on with the intention of snatching the Yitian Sword away. Who would have thought that this young girl was able to launch a Kunlun Pai's sword technique? If she were not too engrossed with her preconception, Kunlun Pai's sword technique would never give her any trouble; it was just that she was taken completely by surprise. Although her martial art skill was high, she was unable to block and was forced to hastily roll back to evade the attack; only she was not fast enough that the end of her left sleeve was cut by the sword.

In her anger Jin Hua Popo pounced back. Zhao Min realized that her martial art skill was too far below her opponent; she did not dare to take the attack head on. Relying on the Yitian Sword she stabbed to the left and cut to the right, brandishing the sword to the east and striking to the west, at the same time keep changing her sword style; one time it was Kongtong, another time Huashan. She launched Kunlun's 'da mo fei sha' [great desert flying sand], followed by Shaolin Pai's 'jin zhen du jie' [crossing golden-lily's pond]. Each stance was the best feature of each Sect; each stance carried an enormous power; enhanced by the very sharp Yitian Sword, confounding Jin Hua Popo and rendering her helpless to press closer.

Zhu'Er was anxious; she loosened the sword from her waist and tossed it towards Jin Hua Popo. Meanwhile Zhao Min ferociously attacked for seven, eight stances. Toward the ninth stance Jin Hua Popo could not help but block using the sword. 'Crack!' her sword was cut into two.

Jin Hua Popo's countenance changed greatly, she rolled away and shouted, "Who are you?"

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Why didn't you pull out the Tulong Saber?"

Jin Hua Popo was angry, "If I had Tulong Saber in my hand, do you think you can stand eight, ten stances against me? Do you dare to try it?"

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Then go and get the Tulong Saber. I am fine with it. I'll be waiting for you at Dadou; we'll fight again when you have the Saber."

"Turn your head around," Jin Hua Popo said, "Let me take a look at your face."

Zhao Min turned her body sideways, stuck out her tongue, closed her left eye and opened her right one, twisted her face muscle; making a ghost face. Jin Hua Popo was very angry; she spat on the ground, tossed her broken sword away, and pulling Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo along she left in big strides.

"Let us go after them," Zhang Wuji said.

"No need to worry," Zhao Min said, "You come with me. I guarantee your Miss Zhou's safety."

"What Tulong Saber were you talking about?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"In that deserted garden I heard that old granny say that she went all over the world, till the end of it, before she finally found an old acquaintance who'd let her borrow a precious weapon, with which she was going to fight Miejue Shitai's Yitian Sword," Zhao Min replied. She recited, "'Yi tian bu chu, shei yu zheng feng'? [Meh's translation: 'Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' Literal

translation: 'relying on heaven (the 'Yitian' of the 'Yitian Sword') does not appear, who can fight its (blade) edge?'] There is no weapon which can match the Yitian Sword but the Tulong Saber. Could it be that she acquired the Tulong Saber from your 'Yifu' [foster father] Xie Lao Qianbei [Old Senior Xie]? I used the Yitian Sword to attack her, with the intention of forcing her to pull the Saber out. Turns out she did not have the treasured Saber in her hand, and challenged me to fight her in the future. Apparently she knows the Tulong Saber's whereabouts; only she was unable to get it yet."

Zhang Wuji thought for a while. "This is strange," he said.

"My guess is she will go to the seaside," Zhao Min said, "She will go to the ocean to fetch the Saber. We must precede them; don't let the old malicious granny swindle blind but kindhearted Xie Lao Qianbei."

Hearing her last sentence, Zhang Wuji's blood bubbled up from his chest, "Yes, yes!" he hastily said. At first he agreed to go with Zhao Min to borrow the Tulong Saber just because as a real man his words must worth a thousand gold; he could not eat his own words. But this time, thinking of Jin Hua Popo was about to make things difficult for his 'yifu', he wished he had wings so that he could fly in a hurry and save his 'yifu'.

Immediately Zhao Min took two people to the Palace. She talked with the guard at the Palace gate without going inside. The guard repeatedly answered in affirmative, then turned around to enter the palace. In a relatively short moment he came back out, leading nine steeds along. He also carried a large bag of gold and silver. Zhao Min, with Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao, rode on three steeds, while leading the other six steeds behind. By alternating their

mounts, they sped up eastwards.

By early morning the next day, the nine steeds were so exhausted that they were unable even to stand. Zhao Min presented the golden medal of the Ruyang Prince, as the highest commander of the entire army, to the local government; they traded the nine steeds and continued their journey. By late evening that day they had arrived at the seaside.

Zhao Min rode the horse straight to the local government mansion. She ordered the magistrate to quickly prepare a strong ocean ship; complete with the helmsmen, the sailors, food and water, weapons and winter clothes. In addition, all ocean ships were to be moved immediately to the south; no other ships were to be moored within fifty 'li's [about 25 km] from that place. With Ruyang Prince's gold medal, how could a lower ranking county magistrate dare not to obey? Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao waited leisurely inside the mansion, eating and drinking wine. Less than a day later the magistrate came back to report that everything was ready.

When three people went to the seaside to inspect, Zhao Min could not help but stomping her feet repeatedly, "Wasted effort!" she bellowed. Turned out by the beach anchored a really big ship with two decks; the decks of the bow, the port and the starboard were loaded with heavy canons. It was a Mongolian navy's battleship.

In those years the Mongolians were trying to send military expedition to Japan; hence they recruited a large number of boat makers. Unexpectedly a major hurricane had scattered the Mongolian navy, resulted in the expedition to the east was postponed indefinitely, but since then the extent of boat making had been declining.

Zhao Min was at her wit's end; she did not expect in order to curry her favor the county magistrate would prepare a battleship for her. By now the food, the water and the supplies had been prepared on board; the other boats had also obeyed the Ruyang Prince's gold medal, they had sailed dozens of 'li's southwards. With a bitter smile Zhao Min ordered the sailors to cover the canons with fishnets, she also had the boat loaded with several hundred catties of fresh fish, to give the impression that it was an old battleship, which was converted to a fishing boat.

Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao three people changed into sailor attire. Using greasepaint they made their faces darker, and then glued some fake moustache and beards; they were not taking any chances. Afterwards they sat quietly in the boat, waiting for Jin Hua Popo's arrival.

This Zhao Min Junzhu's prediction was very accurate; sure enough, that very same evening a large carriage arrived by the seaside. Jin Hua Popo, along with Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo, came looking for a boat. The sailors had received Zhao Min's instruction; they pretended to refuse by saying that the boat was a fishing boat converted from an old battleship, they only caught fish and not interested in taking passengers. It was not until Jin Hua Popo produced two ingots of gold did the captain reluctantly agree to take them aboard. Jin Hua Popo took Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo on board and they set sail immediately, heading east.

On that vast boundless open sea the lone boat sailed to the southeast. During the two days of sailing, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min looked out their cabin window in the bottom deck. They noticed that during the day, the sun, and in the night, the moon, were both rising from the port side. Obviously the boat was sailing to the south. It was the beginning of winter, the boat had the full advantage of the north wind blowing

strong on its sail that they were traveling very fast.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min often had some discussions. “My ‘Yifu’ is on the ‘bing huo dao’ [ice and fire island] of the extreme north; if we want to find him, then we must sail to the north. Why are we going to the south instead?”

Each time Zhao Min always replied, “This Jin Hua Popo is certainly a strange woman. More over, right now the south wind has not arrived yet, there is no way we can sail to the north even if we want to.”

Toward noon on the third day, the captain came down to their cabin to give his report, he said Jin Hua Popo was very familiar of the sea condition around this place; she knew exactly where the sand bar, the reef, and the shallow waters were. She was even more knowledgeable than the captain was.

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, “Ah, right!” he exclaimed, “Could it be that she is returning to the ‘ling she dao’ [spirit snake island]?”

“What Ling She Island?” Zhao Min asked.

“The Ling She Island is Jin Hua Popo’s home,” Zhang Wuji said, “Her late husband was called the ‘yin ye xiansheng’ [Mister Silver Leaf]. Ling She, Jin Hua, Yin Ye [Spirit Snake, Golden Flower and Silver Leaf]; haven’t you heard?”

Zhao Min laughed mockingly and said, “You are only a few years older than I am, but seems like you are an expert in the Jianghu’s matters.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “The heretical devilish Ming Cult certainly knows a lot more of Jianghu matters than

Junzhu Niang-niang.”

These two people were originally archenemies; the groups of warriors under their commands had been engaged in several tough battles. But after several days of living together in a ship’s cabin in the middle of the sea, they were unable to restrain from chatting with each other amiably. Also, with Jin Hua Popo as their common enemy, one more day they were together, one more day the estrangement between them was shed away.

In order not to raise Jin Hua Popo’s suspicions, the captain immediately went back to the upper deck right after giving out his report. Zhao Min laughed and said, “Da Jiaozhu [great cult leader], I wonder if it is bothersome for you to tell this friendless and unlearned young girl about the power and prestige of the Spirit Snake’s Golden Flower and Silver Leaf that shook the Jianghu.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “To my shame, I don’t have the slightest idea Yin Ye Xiansheng is what kind of person; but Jin Hua Popo, I actually have had some encounters with her.” Thereupon he told her how he went to the Butterfly Valley and studied medicine under the ‘die gu yi xian’ [the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley] Hu Qingniu, how some people from different sects were wounded by Jin Hua Popo until they were in between life and death, how they came to the Butterfly Valley for medical help, and how under Hu Qingniu’s direction he cured them all. How Jin Hua Popo contended with Mijue Shitai in martial arts and was defeated, how in the end Hu Qingniu and Wang Nan’gu husband and wife died under Jin Hua Popo’s hands. He told her all kinds of emotions surrounding the circumstances. He felt that although Hu Qingniu’s character was rather peculiar, his treatment toward Zhang Wuji was not bad. Thinking about how those husband and wife’s bodies hung

high on the tree, he was unable to restrain his eyes from turning red. The only thing he did not tell was how Zhu'Er grabbed his hand because she wanted to take him as her playmate on the Ling She Island; and how he bit her arm really bad. Why he omitted this part of the story, Zhang Wuji could not explain; perhaps he felt what he did was rather unsophisticated.

Throughout Zhao Min listened attentively without saying anything. Finally with a serious look on her face she said, "At first I only thought this old granny as a powerful martial art master, turned out she is involved in many gratitude and grudges. Listening to your story, it seems that this old granny is truly a formidable opponent, we must not be careless at all."

Zhang Wuji said with a smile, "Junzhu Niang-niang is well-versed in both pen and sword, under her command there are numerous warriors with marvelous and diverse ability. Dealing with a trivial Jin Hua Popo, she should be able to accomplish the task with ease."

Zhao Min also smiled and said, "Too bad in this boundless ocean I have no way to summon numerous warriors and foreign monks under my command."

Zhang Wuji said, "That chef who prepared our meals, the sailors who pull the sail, although they can't be considered Jianghu's top rank fighters, can't they be counted as the second rank warriors?"

Zhao Min was startled, then broke into chuckle while saying, "My admiration! Da Jiaozhu truly has a good pair of eyes; nothing can be concealed from you."

Turned out when she returned to the Palace to get the gold,

silver and the horses, she also left a secret message via the guard, dispatching a group of warriors under her command to rush to the seaside. They also rode on fast horses, only they arrived half a day later than Zhang Wuji. She had carefully picked the warriors who had not participated in the battle at the Wan An Temple; those who had not met Zhang Wuji before, to come over and guised themselves as kitchen helpers, sailors, et cetera. However, for people who practiced martial art, naturally their facial expression and bodily movement differed from average people; therefore, although they tried to conceal it carefully, Zhang Wuji only needed to take a single look and he had already found out their true identities.

Hearing him say that, Zhao Min mused on the fact that since he could see through their disguise, then Jin Hua Popo must have had seen it also; since she had a lot more experience, plus she was a wily old fox. Luckily they had more people on their side; Zhang Wuji's martial art was far superior. It would be fine whether Jin Hua Popo saw through the disguise or not. Either way, if they were to battle each other, Zhao Min did not have anything to fear from Jin Hua Popo plus Zhu'Er. And since Jin Hua Popo had most likely seen through their disguise then they did not have any reason to continue concealing their true identities.

These past several days, Zhang Wuji was most concerned over whether the poison pill Zhou Zhiruo took had broken out or not. Zhao Min understood his concern; as soon as she saw he wrinkled his brows, she sent someone to the upper cabin with the pretense of serving tea, while spying around on their enemies. Each time he returned, he would report that Miss Zhou looked just fine, without any poisoning symptoms. This happened several times; finally Zhang Wuji felt embarrassed. He sat quietly on the corner of the cabin; thinking about the snowy area of the western region, where Zhu'Er kept him company for several days. How He

Taichong, Wu Lie, Ding Minjun, and the others came and surrounded them, how in the presence of He Taichong and the others he was saying loudly, 'Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy.' How wholeheartedly he promised, 'From now on, I will cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don't care if I'll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings.' Thinking about these things he could not help but blush.

"Pei!" Zhao Min suddenly spat, "You are daydreaming about your Miss Zhou!"

"No, I am not!" Zhang Wuji denied.

"Humph," Zhao Min snorted, "Daydreaming is daydreaming. You are a real man, why would you lie?"

"Did I lie?" Zhang Wuji countered, "I am telling you: I was not thinking about Miss Zhou."

"If you were thinking about Ku Toutuo or Wei Yixiao, you won't have that kind of expression," Zhao Min said, "They are ugly and weird fellows; if you are thinking of them, would you have that kind of gentle and bashful expression on your face?"

Zhang Wuji smiled bashfully, "You are really good," he said, "You can tell whether other people were thinking about some pretty people or some ugly ones. But I am being honest with you, the person I was thinking about is not the least bit pretty."

Zhao Min could see the sincerity in his words; she showed a faint smile and did not pay him anymore attention. Although she was intelligent, she would never guess that the person he was thinking about was that ugly girl Zhu'Er who was inside the upper deck cabin of their boat.

Zhang Wuji recalled how in order to train the poisonous martial art, 'qian zhu wan du shou' [thousand spiders ten-thousand poisonous hands], Zhu'Er's face had become contorted and bumpy. That night at the deserted garden he thought that she looked even worse than in the past. Thinking to this point he could not restrain from heaving a deep sigh; remembering that the deeper she practiced this poisonous skill, the more her whole body and mind would be harmed. He also remembered when Yin Liting told her that Zhang Wuji had died falling down from the cliff; Zhu'Er had shown her true feeling by crying bitterly. Zhang Wuji was very grateful over that matter.

Ever since he arrived at the Brightness Peak, day in and day out he was either busy training martial arts or busy tending the Ming Cult affairs; when did he ever have time to sit down peacefully and think about his own concerns? Once in a while he would remember Zhu'Er, then he would ask Wei Yixiao to look for her, or ask Yang Xiao to dispatch some search and rescue team to look around the Peak; but all those times nobody found out her whereabouts. Now he rebuked himself deeply, "Zhu'Er has always been good to me, but why have I been so ignorant about her? Why haven't I given any thought to her these past several days?" Actually, since he took the Cult Leader position of the Ming Cult, all his personal affairs were totally out of his mind.

"What are you regretting?" Zhao Min suddenly asked.

Before Zhang Wuji could reply, they heard shouts from the

upper deck; followed by a sailor coming down to give his report, "We see land ahead. The Granny ordered us to pick up speed and come ashore."

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked out from their window and saw that there was a big island several 'li's ahead with trees and lush green vegetation on it. There was a strange looking peak on the island; it was tall and towering straight above a forest of pine trees. The boat was sailing fast because of the favorable wind; they had arrived on shore in just a time needed to eat a bowl of rice.

On the eastern end of the island there was a rocky hill protruding into the sea, with no sandy beach on it. Although the battle ship was deep into the water due to its weight, it would be able to anchor right next to the shore. But before the anchor was down, they heard a ferocious shout coming from the hill; the shout was full of rage, with an overwhelming power in it.

Zhang Wuji was pleasantly surprised, since he recognized the voice; the shout belonged to his Yifu, the 'jin mao shi wang' [golden-mane lion king] Xie Xun. It had been more than ten years, but his Yifu's heroic air was still as he remembered it; how could he not feel extremely joyful? Without thinking how Xie Xun from the far north Bing Huo Island could be on that island, also without any regard if Jin Hua Popo would see through his disguise, he hurriedly stepped down the wooden plank and ran toward the hill from which the shout originated to take a look.

He saw four men with unsheathed weapons in their hands surrounding a tall and big man. That man was facing the enemies with an empty hand. He was none other than Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun.

Zhang Wuji took a quick glance and saw that although his Yifu was blind, although he was surrounded by four men, although he faced four weapons barehanded, he did not by any chance lose his imposing air. Zhang Wuji had never seen his Yifu fight an enemy before; now that he had the opportunity to witness several stances, he was very happy. "Jin Mao Shi Wang's prestige shook the world in the past; it certainly was not an empty reputation," he said to himself, "Yifu's martial art skill is above 'Qing Yi Fu Wang' [Green-Winged Bat King]; I'll say he is on par with (maternal) grandfather."

The four people's martial arts were certainly not bad either. From where he was, near the boat, looking to the hill, Zhang Wuji was not able to see their faces clearly; but he could see that they were wearing raggedy clothes with cloth sacks on their backs. Obviously, they were from the Beggar Clan. Three other men stood on the side, ready to join the battle.

Zhang Wuji heard someone was saying, "Hand over the Tulong Saber ... we'll spare your life ... precious saber in place of your life ..." The strong wind from the hill transmitted the voice intermittently, making him difficult to understand clearly what they were saying; but Zhang Wuji knew that these people were here to snatch the precious Tulong Saber.

He heard Xie Xun laugh a big laugh and say, "The Tulong Saber is in my possession. The Beggar Clan's stinky thieves; if you have the ability then get it from me." His hands and feet did not slow down the least bit when his mouth was speaking.

In a flash Jin Hua Popo had run ashore; amidst the coughing she said, "Beggar Clan's Heroes, welcome to the Ling She Island. You did not come and talk to Lao Po, but disturb the Ling She Island's honorable guest. What do you want?"

"This is indeed the Ling She Island," Zhang Wuji thought, "Listening to Jin Hua Popo, apparently Yifu is her invited guest. Yifu has said that in any event he won't be willing to leave Bing Huo Island and return to the Central Plains; how come on Jin Hua Popo's invitation he was willing to come? How could Jin Hua Popo find out Yifu's whereabouts?" Questions after questions grew in his heart.

Hearing the host had arrived, the four people on the hill wanted to subdue Xie Xun as quick as possible; they attacked more urgently. But in doing so, they had actually violated a major principle in the study of martial art. Xie Xun was blind, thus he depended on the wind generated by the weapons to distinguish the enemies' positions. The faster these four people moved their hands, the stronger the wind generated by their weapons.

Xie Xun let out a long laugh. 'Bang!' he hit one enemy squarely on his chest. That man let out a long miserable scream and fell straight down from the hill into the rocks below. His skull broke and his brain splattered everywhere.

One of the three people standing on the side shouted, "Back off!" With a light movement he stepped forward, his fist floating in the air with strength that was sometimes there and sometimes not there, making it hard for Xie Xun to distinguish the sound. Sure enough, it was not until the fist was only a few inches from him that he finally realized it. He hastily tried to block the attack; his movement was awkward, he was truly in a very difficult situation.

The three men who fought previously moved back quickly; while an old man who was standing on the side took over their place. This old man incorporated the same technique as the first man; his palm was also light. Several stances

later Xie Xun was forced to block to the east and evade to the west; he was in a really dangerous situation.

“Ji Zhanglao [Elder Ji], Zheng Zhanglao [Elder Zheng]!” Jin Hua Popo shouted, “Jin Mao Shi Wang is inconvenienced by his eyes; you are fighting him with this despicable method. You are enjoying a reputation as Jianghu’s heroes for nothing.” She was talking and walking to the hill at the same time, with the help of her walking stick.

She was walking in faltering steps, as if a mountain breeze would blow her off the hill; but actually she was moving very fast. Supported by the stick, it looked like she was riding the wind, floating forward; with several strikes of her stick she quickly reached the waist of the hill. Zhu’Er followed closely behind her, but just in a short moment she fell behind.

Zhang Wuji was concerned over his Yifu’s safety, he quickly ran up the hill. Zhao Min followed behind him. In a low voice she said, “With this Old Granny here, Shi Wang [Lion King] will not be in grave danger. Don’t do anything yet, you’d better hide your identity first.”

Zhang Wuji nodded and followed behind Zhu’Er. By now all he could see was Zhu’Er’s graceful and slender body. If he did not know Zhu’Er’s face, wouldn’t he think she was an extremely beautiful woman, not inferior to Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo, and Xiao Zhao, three girls? Once he had this thought, immediately he scolded himself, “Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, your Yifu is facing a grave danger, yet you are looking at a girl and seizing her up, whether she is a beautiful woman or not.”

In a short moment, the four of them had reached the peak of the hill. They saw that Xie Xun was keeping his hands close to his body, in a defensive position without even trying to

attack. Only when the enemy's fist or kick came near did he use a little bit of 'qin na' [grappling technique] to parry the attack. This way he was able to hold out against the enemy momentarily, but it would be difficult for him to score a victory.

Zhang Wuji stood underneath a cluster of pine trees. He saw his Yifu's face was full of wrinkles, and there were more white hair on his head; he looked a lot older than the last time they parted. Zhang Wuji guessed that for the past dozen of years he was living alone on that desolate island, he must have passed the days with difficulty. Zhang Wuji was grieved, he felt blood rushing up in his chest and could not help but feel a strong urge to fight the enemy for him. He stepped forward to get a closer look at the enemies. Zhao Min understood his intention; she lightly pinched his hand and shook her head.

"Ji Zhanglao," Jin Hua Popo said, "Your 'yin shan zhang da jiu shi' [lit. nine great style of 'yin' (negative, female, of 'yin and yang') mountain palm] is famous throughout the Jianghu; why are you stealthily changing it to 'mian zhang zhao shi' [lit. cotton palm style]? Zheng Zhanglao is even more unspeakable; you conceal the 'hui feng fu liu quan' [lit. returning wind brushing away the willow fist (technique)] inside the 'ba gua quan' [eight-diagram fist (technique)]. Of course Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] does not know that ... (cough, cough) ..."

Since Xie Xun could not see the enemies' style, he was at a great disadvantage over them. Moreover, Ji and Zheng two elders were extremely cunning; by deliberately concealing their style, Xie Xun was having trouble predicting their moves. As Jin Hua Popo exposed their trick, Xie Xun's confidence grew. He waited until Zheng Zhanglao was about to change his fist technique, suddenly he struck straight

ahead; his fist collided with Zheng Zhanglao's fist. Zheng Zhanglao staggered back two steps until he bumped into a tree stump. Ji Zhanglao thrust his palm from the side to protect his companion, forcing Xie Xun to stop from pursuing him.

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the two Beggar Clan's Elders; Ji Zhanglao was short and plump, with a red face, reminding him of a village butcher. Zheng Zhanglao was tall and skinny, with an ashen look, a perfect picture of a beggar. Both men carried eight cloth sacks on their back. The other man standing afar looked about thirty years of age; he also wore a beggar clothes, but his clothes was neat and clean. Surprisingly he also carried eight cloth sacks on his back. For someone his age to achieve an eight-bag elder position of the Beggar Clan was extremely rare. Suddenly that man opened his mouth, "Jin Hua Popo, you said you were not going to help Xie Xun, but in the end you are helping him. Aren't you ashamed?"

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, "Are you also a Beggar Clan's Elder, Sire? Please forgive this Old Granny's faulty vision for not recognizing you."

"I joined the Beggar Clan not too long ago, no wonder Popo did not know," that man replied, "My surname is Chen, given name Youliang."

"Chen Youliang? Chen Youliang?" Jin Hua Popo muttered, "I have never heard that name."

Suddenly a cry was heard as Zheng Zhanglao's left arm was hit by Xie Xun. The three Beggar Clan disciples who were standing on the side immediately charged forward with their unsheathed weapons. These three's martial art skills were inferior to Ji and Zheng, two Elders; normally they would

only be in the Elders' way, but since Xie Xun became blind, he had never fought with anybody, so his battle experience was lacking. Today was the first time he fought powerful enemies. Amidst the sound of fists and kicks were the sounds of the weapons; these mixtures of noises made him difficult to distinguish the enemies' positions. In a moment his shoulder was hit by a fist.

Seeing the critical situation, Zhang Wuji was about to make his move, but Zhao Min said in a low voice, "Certainly Jin Hua Popo would help?" Zhang Wuji halted his steps; he looked at Jin Hua Popo, and saw that she was leaning on her stick with cold smile on her face, without giving any sign that she was going to help.

By that time Xie Xun's left leg was kicked heavily by Zheng Zhanglao. Xie Xun staggered, he nearly fell down. Zhang Wuji had already prepared seven small pebbles in his hand; by now he could not wait any longer, his right hand moved, the seven pebbles flew toward the five people surrounding Xie Xun. But before the pebbles hit their targets, a black light flashed; 'swish!' three weapons were cut down. Among the five people, four were cut off right on their chests, becoming eight pieces, which scattered to all directions, falling off the hill. Only Zheng Zhanglao survived with his right arm cut off, but his back was hit by the two pebbles Zhang Wuji shot; he fell on the ground. The four of the slain people's back were also hit by the pebbles, only the Saber cut them off first before the pebbles arrived. This time Zhang Wuji's action was actually unnecessary.

This incident happened so fast that everybody was startled. They saw Xie Xun's hand was holding a deep black saber, precisely what was known as 'wu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the Wulin (martial art) world], the Tulong Saber [Dragon-slaying Saber]. He held the Saber horizontally

across his chest, standing on the peak of the hill, his power and prestige made people shiver, he looked just like a deity.

Zhang Wuji had seen this Saber since he was little, yet he had never expected its sharpness to have such an overwhelming power as demonstrated just now. Jin Hua Popo muttered, “'Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long’! [the most revered in the Wulin world, precious saber slaying the dragon] ‘Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long’!”

Losing his arm, Zheng Zhanglao screamed in pain just like a pig getting slaughtered. Chen Youliang pale faced, he said in a loud voice, “Xie Daxia’s [great hero Xie’s] martial art is unparalleled, my utmost admiration! I ask you to let this Zheng Zhanglao go down the hill. Let me trade my life with his. Xie Daxia, please make your move!”

His speech made everybody’s countenance change; they had not expected this person’s ‘yi qi’ [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood] to be this deep. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel quite respectful towards him.

“Chen Youliang,” Xie Xun said, “Hmm, you are a real man. Take this surnamed Zheng away, I will not make things difficult for you!”

“Let me thank Xie Daxia first for your graciousness in not killing us,” Chen Youliang said, “Only the Beggar Clan has five lives died under Xie Daxia’s hands. I am going to train for ten more years. If I achieve success, I am going to come again to settle this debt.”

Xie Xun thought that he only have to move one step forward and brandish his precious saber, then this man would not escape alive; yet under this extremely dangerous situation he still had the nerve to say that he would come back to

seek revenge in the future; he was a very brave man. Thereupon Xie Xun said, "If the Old Man is still alive ten years from now, I am going to wait for your instructions."

Chen Youliang cupped his fists toward Jin Hua Popo in salute and said, "Without permission the Beggar Clan has trespassed your island; herewith we apologize!" Carrying Zheng Zhanglao, he went down the hill in big strides.

Jin Hua Popo turned toward Zhang Wuji and coldly said, "You, this young fella, you are good at the acupoint striking technique. Why are you shooting seven pebbles? One was meant for Chen Youliang, the other was meant for me, wasn't it?"

Seeing she was able to see that he has prepared the seven pebbles, but was not able to see through his disguise, Zhang Wuji did not know how to reply; he only showed a faint smile.

"Young fella," Jin Hua Popo said sternly, "What is your honored name? Disguising yourself as a sailor, following Lao Po Zi [the Old Granny] around, what is your purpose? You dare to act craftily in front of Jin Hua Popo; are you bored of your life?"

Zhang Wuji was not used to tell lies; he was startled and could not answer. Zhao Min made her voice hoarse and answered, "We are from the 'ju jing bang' [gigantic whale clan], we make our living on the sea, doing business without any capital. Lao Popo [Old Granny] offered us a lot of gold, so what's wrong with giving you a ride? This brother saw the Beggar Clan was cheating and he wanted to lend a hand. His intention was good, but we did not expect Xie Daxia's martial art was this high; in the end we were only being meddlesome."

Although she imitated a male's voice, her voice was still unavoidably sharp; piercing the ears of those who heard her. Luckily her makeup was perfect; her face was yellowish and looked like an old man, Jin Hua Popo was not able to see the flaw.

"Many thanks!" Xie Xun waved his left hand and said, "Ay, Jin Mao Shi Wang is like a tiger fallen on the plains that he has to receive help from Ju Jing Bang. Leaving the Jianghu for twenty years, capable people have come forth in the Wulin world in large numbers; why should I come back?"

When speaking the last sentence, his voice was full of sorrow, as he sighed with depressing emotion. Just now when Zhang Wuji shot those seven pebbles, Xie Xun could hear clearly the strength behind the shot; strength like that was truly rare in the world. He was shocked that there was such an expert in the Wulin world. Also, in the battle today, the reason he escaped injury from besiege after fighting all night was entirely due to the Tulong Saber. Suddenly the memory of the Wangpan Island some twenty years ago where he faced a group of warrior was like a different lifetime to him.

"Xie San Ge [third (older) brother Xie]," Jin Hua Popo said, "I know you don't like other people meddling in your fight; that's why I did not lend you a hand. You are not offended, are you?"

Hearing her unexpectedly calling his Yifu 'San Ge', Zhang Wuji was astonished. He did not know his Yifu ranked third in seniority; because looking at Jin Hua Popo, he was certain that she was older than his Yifu.

"Why am I not surprised?" he heard Xie Xun replied, "You

were returning to the Central Plains this time, did you hear anything about that child of mine Wuji?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked; but he felt a soft palm was holding his hand tightly. He knew Zhao Min did not want him to step forward and expose himself. Just now he did not listen to her advice and rashly shot the pebbles to help; in the end he let their existence to be known. Only his concerns toward Xie Xun went to the extreme; he could not let Xie Xun being bullied by anybody. This time he felt it was all right to momentarily restrain himself.

"Nothing," Jin Hua Popo said.

Xie Xun heaved a deep sigh and was silent for a long time before he finally said, "Mrs. Han, we are brother and sister [Translator's note: the characters used here are 'xiong mei' - (older) brother, (younger) sister], you cannot deceive me, a blind man. Tell me, that child of mine, Wuji, is he still alive in this world?"

Jin Hua Popo hesitated without answering. Zhu'Er suddenly said, "Xie Daxia ..." Jin Hua Popo reached out with her left hand to grab her wrist and stared hard at her; Zhu'Er did not dare to continue.

"Miss Yin," Xie Xun said, "Tell me, tell me! Your Popo is deceiving me, is she not?"

Two streams of tears flowed down on Zhu'Er's cheeks. Jin Hua Popo lifted up her right hand and placed it on top of her head, so that as soon as Zhu'Er said something she did not wish she would exert her internal energy and take her life.

"Xie Daxia," Zhu'Er said, "My Popo did not deceive you. We went to the Central Plains this time, we did not hear any

news about Zhang Wuji.”

Hearing what she said, Jin Hua Popo took her right palm from Zhu’Er’s forehead, but she still grabbed her wrist tight.

“So what news did you hear?” Xie Xun asked, “What happened to the Ming Cult? What happened to our old acquaintances?”

“I don’t know,” Jin Hua Popo replied, “I did not inquire anything on the Jianghu matters. I was only looking for the Toutuo [Buddhist monk with hair] who killed my husband to settle the debt; and for Emei Pai’s Miejue Laoni [Old Nun Miejue], to avenge that sword duel defeat. As for other matters, Lao Po Zi does not care.”

Xie Xun indignantly said, “All right, Mrs. Han, that day on the Bing Huo Island, what did you say to me? You said my Zhang Wudi [fifth brother Zhang], husband and wife, were not willing to reveal my hiding place; they were forced to cut their own throats on the Wudang Mountain. That child of mine, Wuji, became an orphan with nobody to care for him; that he was wandering in the Jianghu, that everywhere he went he was bullied by others, that he was destitute and miserable beyond words. Did you not say that?”

“That’s right!” Jin Hua Popo said.

“You said that he was struck by the Xuanming Shen Zhang [mysterious and dark divine palm]; he endured the suffering day and night,” Xie Xun continued, “You said you met him at the Butterfly Valley, and that you wanted him to come with you to the Ling She Island , but he was not willing. Is that right?”

“That’s right!” Jin Hua Popo said, “If I lied to you, may the

Heaven punish me and the Earth extinguish me, may Jin Hua Popo becomes the lowest of low in the Jianghu, may my departed husband does not have peace in his grave."

Xie Xun nodded. "Miss Yin," he said, "What was it that you wanted to say?"

Zhu'Er replied, "I was going to say that at that time I urged him to come with us to the Ling She Island; he did not want to listen, and bit me instead. His teeth mark is still on the back of my hand; I am telling you the truth. I ... I am very concerned about him."

Suddenly Zhao Min tightened her hand, which was grabbing Zhang Wuji's palm; her eyes were staring at him with contempt, but also with a teasing look, as if she was saying, 'You lied to me! Turned out you knew this girl; not only that, there were many entanglements between the two of you.'

Zhang Wuji blushed; remembering how Zhu'Er had a strange fondness toward him, his heart was bittersweet. All of a sudden Zhao Min lifted up Zhang Wuji's hand toward her mouth and she bit the back of his hand really hard. As his hand was bleeding, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [Nine Yang Divine Energy/Power] in Zhang Wuji's body automatically reacted. Zhao Min felt a shock on her mouth that the corner of her mouth was also bleeding. This short episode between the two of them happened noiselessly.

Zhang Wuji looked at Zhao Min with questioning eyes, wondering why in the world she suddenly bit him. But he saw her eyes were full of smiles, her face was blushing, beautiful as the springtime. Although she was wearing fake moustache above her lips, the moustache failed to cover her sweetness and beauty. Confusion filled his heart.

“Very well!” Xie Xun said, “Mrs. Han, it was because of my concern over my child Wuji that I took the tens of thousands of ‘li’s journey back from the Bing Huo Island to the Central Plains. You promised to find Wuji for me; why didn’t you keep your promise?”

Tears streaming down Zhang Wuji’s cheeks; it was only then did he found out that although his Yifu knew he had enemies everywhere, disregarding grave dangers he returned to the Central Plains, it was all because of him.

Jin Hua Popo said, “That day we reached an agreement; I will look for your Zhang Wuji, you will lend me the Tulong Saber. Xie San Ge, let me borrow your Saber, Lao Po Zi’s words are like mountain; I will find this youngster for you.”

Xie Xun shook his head. “Bring Wuji over here; naturally I’ll lend you the Saber.”

“You don’t trust me?” Jin Hua Popo coldly asked.

“The matters of the world are not easy to say,” Xie Xun replied, “Even close relatives like father and son or brother and sister sometimes are not trustworthy.”

Zhang Wuji knew he was referring to Cheng Kun in the past; he felt sorry for his Yifu.

“Then you are sure you won’t let me borrow the Saber in advance?” Jin Hua Popo asked.

“I let the Beggar Clan’s Chen Youliang go down the mountain,” Xie Xun said, “From now on there will be no more peaceful days on the Ling She Island. I don’t know how many enemies of mine of the Wulin world would come over to make things difficult for me. Jin Mao Shi Wang is not like

what he used to be; other than this Tulong Saber, I don't even have a staff to lean on. Hey ... hey ..." Suddenly he let out a cold laugh and said, "Mrs. Han, just now five people were surrounding me. Even that hero from the Ju Jing Bang was preparing seven pebbles in his hand. Are you sure you don't have any intention to harm me? You are hoping that I would die under the hands of the Beggar Clan, and then you can leisurely pick up the spoil. Xie Xun's eyes maybe blind, but his hear is not. Mrs. Han, let me ask you again, Xie Xun came to your Ling She Island in secret; how did the Beggar Clan find out my whereabouts?"

"I was just going to find out," Jin Hua Popo said.

Xie Xun flicked a finger on the blade of the Tulong Saber then he put it inside his robe. "You are not willing to find my Wuji for me, that's fine," he said, "Xie Xun only needs to re-enter the Jianghu and makes some earth-shattering disturbance." Tilting up his head he let out a loud whistle; and then leaped up and ran from the west side of the hill. His steps were quick; he headed straight toward a mountain peak on the northern end of the island. There was a lone thatched hut on the mountain peak; apparently it was where he lived.

Jin Hua Popo waited until Xie Xun had gone far. She turned around and stared at Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min. "Get lost!" she barked.

Pulling Zhang Wuji's hand, Zhao Min immediately went down the mountain, returning to their boat.

"I want to see Yifu," Zhang Wuji said.

"When your Yifu left, Jin Hua Popo stared at him viciously, didn't you see that?" Zhao Min asked.

"I am not afraid of her," Zhang Wuji replied.

"There are so many surreptitious matters on this island," Zhao Min said, "How could the Beggar Clan people come into this island? How did Jin Hua Popo know your Yifu's whereabouts? How could she find the Bing Huo Island? There are so many unanswered mysteries here. It's not difficult for you to kill Jin Hua Popo, but then we will never find out the answers to these questions."

"It's not that I want to kill Jin Hua Popo," Zhang Wuji said, "It's just that Yifu misses me so much; I must go and see him."

Zhao Min shook her head, "You haven't seen each other for more than a dozen years," she reasoned, "Why can't you wait one or two more days? Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang], let me tell you something: no doubt we must guard against Jin Hua Popo; but more importantly, we must guard against Chen Youliang."

"That Chen Youliang?" Zhang Wuji asked, "This man's 'yi qi' is very deep; he is a true gentleman."

"Do you really believe it in your heart? Or are you merely making fun of me?" Zhao Min asked.

"Why would I make fun of you?" Zhang Wuji wondered, "This man was willing to die in place of that Zheng Zhanglao; a man of his quality is truly rare."

Zhao Min stared at him for a moment and sighed. "Zhang Gongzi, oh, Zhang Gongzi," she said, "You are the Ming Cult's Cult Leader; you are commanding of I don't know how many fierce and wild warriors and heroes, executing I don't

know how many important matters, yet you are this gullible? How can that be?"

"I am gullible?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"This Chen Youliang was obviously swindling Xie Daxia," Zhao Min said, "You were witnessing it with your own eyes; how can you not see it?"

"He was swindling my Yifu?" Zhang Wuji jumped.

"Xie Daxia was wielding the Tulong Saber," Zhao Min said, "Four of the Beggar Clan's masters were killed. Even if Chen Youliang's martial art skill were higher, he might not necessarily be able to escape from the Tulong Saber's cut. In this situation, he could charge forward staking everything he got and die, or he could kneel down for mercy. But just think about it, Xie Daxia does not want anybody to know his whereabouts; even if Chen Youliang knocked his head three hundred times, he might not necessarily be able to gain pity from Xie Daxia's tender heart. Other than pretending to be someone with thick 'yi qi', do you think he would have a better way?"

While she was speaking, she took Zhang Wuji's hand and applied ointment on the bite-wound, and wrapped her own handkerchief over it.

Listening to her analysis of Chen Youliang's plight, Zhang Wuji thought she was right; but thinking back about Chen Youliang's heroic and vehement attitude, also his manner of speaking, Zhang Wuji could not detect any falseness; hence, he was still unconvinced.

"All right," Zhao Min said, "Let me ask you this: when that Chen Youliang was speaking to Xie Daxia, what were the

positions of his hands and his feet?”

When he was listening to Chen Youliang, Zhang Wuji only occasionally looked at his face, while the other times looked at his Yifu; he had not paid any attention to Chen Youliang’s hands and feet, but actually Chen Youliang’s posture was projected in his mind. If nobody mentioned this, he would not remember; this time hearing Zhao Min’s question, the scene came back in his brain. He said, “Mmm, Chen Youliang’s right hand was slightly raised, his left hand across the body; that was the ‘shi zi bo tu’ [the lion catches the rabbit]. What about his feet? Mmm, right! That was the ‘jiang mo ti dou shi’ [devil-subduing kicking style]. Both were part of Shaolin Pai’s fist techniques; nothing special about them. Could it be that he was asking a favor from Yifu, but actually he was going to launch a sneak attack? That can’t be right; these two styles are not very effective.”

Zhao Min coldly laughed, “Zhang Gongzi,” she said, “You really do not have any understanding about people’s hearts, do you? Even if that Chen Youliang wanted to stealthily attack Xie Daxia, do you think he has the ability? This person is so cunning, he is a first class smart person; he understands people very well. Supposed his feigned ‘yi qi’ did not work; Xie Daxia could see through his scheme and was not willing to let him go, then with his posture, whom would he kick with the ‘devil-subduing kick’? Whom would he catch with the ‘lion catches the rabbit’?”

Because Zhang Wuji had always thought people everywhere were kindhearted, he had never thought deeply about Chen Youliang’s scheme. Now that Zhao Min brought it up, his mind was churning. Cold sweats started to trickle down his back; with a trembling voice he said, “He ... he was going to kick Zheng Zhanglao who was lying on the ground; and he was going to grab Miss Yin.”

Zhao Min smiled sweetly. "That's right!" she said, "He was going to kick Zheng Zhanglao toward Xie Daxia. He would also grab that childhood sweetheart of yours, that Miss Yin whose hand you bit, and shove her toward Xie Daxia, with the hope that they would slow him down a little bit. Then he would use the opportunity to escape with his life. Even though Xie Daxia's ability is matchless and he was holding a precious saber in his hand, Chen Youliang still had a slim chance of escaping; other than that, he did not have any other choice. If it were me, I'd do the same. Up until now, I still have not found a better way. This man was able to think such a clever method in a short moment; he is truly amazing." She could not stop praising him.

The more Zhang Wuji thought, the more upset he became; he had never thought that people in this world could be that ruthless. Ever since he was little, he had experienced countless hardships, yet he had never seen anything of Chen Youliang's caliber. After half a day he said, "Miss Zhao, you were able to see through his intentions; I am afraid you are not inferior to him."

Zhao Min's countenance turned dark. "Are you ridiculing me?" she asked, "Let me tell you something: if you are afraid of my wicked scheming, then stay far away from me."

"That is not necessary," Zhang Wuji said with a smile, "You have already used a lot of deceit against me, I can guard against all of them."

Zhao Min showed a faint smile and said, "You can guard against my deceit? How come you don't know I applied some poison to the back of your hand?"

Zhang Wuji was startled; he did feel a bit of itch and numb, a rather unusual feeling. Hastily he tore the handkerchief

down and brought his hand to his nose. “Aiyo!” he could not help exclaiming. He knew it was the ‘qu fu xiao ji gao’ [flesh/muscle decomposer ointment], an external medication, which could erode rotting flesh from a wound. Although it was not a poison, applied to the bite-marks it would deepen the wound. This ointment actually carried a pungent smell, but Zhao Min had mixed some rouge in it; she also used her own handkerchief to wrap the wound, so the smell was somewhat obscured that Zhang Wuji was not able to detect it.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly ran to the stern to wash his wound with some fresh water. Zhao Min followed behind him; helping him washing the wound while laughing and giggling.

Zhang Wuji pushed her shoulder away and said angrily, “Stay away from me! What kind of joke is this? Do you think it didn’t hurt?”

Still giggling Zhao Min replied, “It is truly ‘the dog that bites Lu Dongbin’; you are unable to recognize other’s kindness. I was afraid you are in so much pain that I used this method.”

[Translator’s note: ‘the dog that bites Lu Dongbin’ is a Chinese proverb, which means an inability to recognize goodness and repay kindness with vice. Lu Dongbin was one of the Eight Immortals (ba xian) in Taoist legends.]

Zhang Wuji ignored her remark; he furiously went back to his cabin and closed his eyes.

Zhao Min followed in and called, “Zhang Gongzi!” Zhang Wuji pretended to be asleep. Zhao Min called him two more times, but Zhang Wuji simply snored even louder. Zhao Min sighed, “If I knew you would be like this, I would have spread

a real poison to take your dog's life then I wouldn't have to deal with you anymore."

Zhang Wuji opened his eyes and said, "How can I be the dog that bites Lu Dongbin; unable to recognize other's kindness? You tell me."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "If I tell you, then what are you going to do?"

"You are always able to present a strong argument on everything; naturally I can't argue with you," Zhang Wuji said.

"You haven't heard what I am going to say and you admit defeat already?" Zhao Min said with a smile, "You knew all along that my intention was good."

"Pei!" Zhang Wuji spat, "Good intention indeed! You bit my hand, but did not apologize. Fine! But why did you have to spread poison on my wound? I'd rather not receive your kindness."

"Hmm," Zhao Min said, "Let me ask you this: which one was deeper, my bite on you, or your bite on Miss Yin?"

Zhang Wuji blushed. "That ... that was a long time ago," he stammered, "Why do you have to bring it up?"

"I want to bring it up," Zhao Min insisted, "Just answer my question; don't talk in circles."

"Granted that my bite on Miss Yin was deeper," Zhang Wuji admitted, "But at that time she was grabbing me, while my martial art was inferior to her; no matter what I did, I could not shake her loose. As a child, my heart was anxious, and I just bit her. You are not a child; I did not grab you and want

you to come to the Ling She Island, did I?"

"That's strange," Zhao Min laughed, "So she grabbed you and wanted you to come to the Ling She Island, but you'd rather die than come with her. Presently nobody invited you to come, yet you willingly came without any fuss? After all, when people grow, their hearts also grow, everything changes."

Zhang Wuji's entire face turned red. "You are the one who wanted me to come!" he said with a smile.

Hearing this, Zhao Min's face also turned red, but she felt an indescribable sweetness in her heart. It was as if Zhang Wuji was saying, 'She wanted me to come, I'd rather die than come. You wanted me to come, I immediately came.'

Two people looked at each other for half a day without saying anything then suddenly they averted their gaze from each other. Zhao Min lowered her head and said, "Very well, I'll tell you: it was a very long time ago that you bit Miss Yin, yet she has never forgotten you. I heard the way she talked; I am afraid she won't ever forget you for the rest of her life. The reason I bit you is so that you also won't forget me for the rest of your life."

Only upon hearing this last sentence did Zhang Wuji finally understand her profound meaning; his heart was moved and he was speechless.

"I saw the tooth marks on the back of her hand," Zhao Min continued, "Your bite was very deep; I thought that you bit her really deep, her memory of you is also deep. I wanted to bite you really deep, but I did not have the heart to do so; but if I bit you lightly, I am afraid you will forget me in the future. I thought about it left and right, then decided to bite

you first, then spread the 'qu fu xiao ji gao'; so that those tooth marks will be deepened."

At first Zhang Wuji thought it was funny then he thought that although with this act she was indulging in fantasy, in the end it was a demonstration of her deep affection to him. He sighed and softly said, "I don't blame you. I was truly the dog that bites Lu Dongbin; I was unable to recognize your kindness. You are treating me this way, as such; there is no way I'm going to forget you."

Initially Zhao Min felt vulnerable after revealing her tender feelings, but after hearing his words her eyes flashed mischievously; she smiled and said, "You said, 'you were treating me this way'; are you saying that I treated you badly, or I treated you well? Zhang Gongzi, my bad treatments to you is actually numerous, but my good treatment is none."

Zhang Wuji said, "Later on your treatment to me will be somewhat better." Grabbing her hand, he brought it to his mouth. "I want to also bite you really bad, so you won't forget me for the rest of your life," he said with a laugh.

Zhao Min suddenly felt very bashful; she shook his hand and rushed out of the cabin. As she opened the cabin door, she almost bumped into Xiao Zhao. Zhao Min was startled. "Damn it!" she silently cursed, "If my conversation with him was heard by this girl, I would die of embarrassment." She could not help but blushing profusely while she ran to the upper deck.

Xiao Zhao came to Zhang Wuji and said, "Gongzi, I saw Jin Hua Popo and that ugly girl went that way; they were carrying a big sack together. I don't know what kind of crafty trick they are planning to do."

"Hmm," Zhang Wuji mumbled. He realized his conversation with Zhao Min had turned intimate; to have Xiao Zhao suddenly appear, he was unavoidably ashamed. He stared blankly for a moment before finally asking, "Are they going toward that small mountain hut on the northern side of the island?"

"They are going north alright, but they are not going to the mountain," Xiao Zhao replied, "It seemed like they were in a deep argument with each other. That Jin Hua Popo looked very angry."

Zhang Wuji went to the stern. He saw Zhao Min was standing at the bow with her eyes gazing toward the ocean. She did not turn her body around. He heard the mighty waves of the sea pounding the hull of the boat. He felt that his heart was as tumultuous as those fluctuating waves; he tried with great difficulty to calm it down.

The sun gradually set toward the western horizon in what he felt like a very long time; the trees on the island turned darker and became a blur in his eyes. Finally Zhang Wuji returned to his cabin.

During supper that night he told Zhao Min and Xiao Zhao, "I am going to visit Yifu. It would be better for the two of you to stay and guard the boat, so that we won't scare Jin Hua Popo away."

"Then I think you'd better wait for another night watch," Zhao Min said, "Wait till the sky turns really dark before you leave."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied. His heart was boiling with anxiety over his Yifu's safety; this one night watch was indeed

unbearable to him.

With great difficulty he waited until he could not see anything anywhere he looked. Finally he stood up, smiled faintly at Zhao Min and Xiao Zhao then he walked toward to the cabin door.

“Zhang Gongzi,” Zhao Min called while loosening the Yitian Sword on her waist, “Take this sword for self defense.”

Zhang Wuji was startled; “You’d better keep it with you,” he said.

“No!” Zhao Min refused, “This time I am worried about you.”

Zhang Wuji smiled, “Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Zhao Min replied, “Jin Hua Popo’s surreptitious craftiness is unpredictable; Chen Youliang is a bag full of tricks. Also I don’t know whether your Yifu will be convinced that you are his ‘child Wuji’ ... Ay, this island is known as the ‘Spirit Snake’, perhaps there are highly venomous vipers everywhere; besides ...” Speaking to this point, she suddenly stopped.

“Besides what?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min raised her hand toward her mouth and made a biting motion. She giggled and her cheeks blushed. Zhang Wuji knew she meant to say his cousin, Miss Yin. He waved his hand and went out the cabin door.

“Catch!” Zhao Min called out, tossing the Yitian Sword to him.

Zhang Wuji caught the Sword; his heart was touched. “She

trusts me this much to the point of letting me borrow the Yitian Sword," he thought. He tied the Sword on his back and walked toward the mountain peak on the northern end of the island. Keeping in mind what Zhao Min said he always stepped on bald rocks fearing there were venomous snakes among the grass.

In about the time needed to drink a cup of tea, he reached the base of the mountain. He looked up and saw that the hut where his Yifu lived was completely dark, without any light. "Has Yifu gone to bed?" he thought. But then he remembered, "His eyes are blind; why would he need any light?" Right at that moment he faintly heard voices from the left-hand side of the mountain. Quickly he crouched down, turning his attention towards the direction of the sound, but by that time the voices were gone.

It was the beginning of the month and the north wind was blowing over the trees and bushes. Zhang Wuji moved quickly along the rustling noise of the blowing wind toward the source of the voices. Soon he heard Jin Hua Popo's low and throaty voice about four, five 'zhang's ahead, she said "Still don't want to do it? What are you waiting for?"

"Popo," Yin Li replied, "Why are you doing this, as if ... as if you don't care about the old friendship? Xie Daxia and you have known each other from dozens of years; he trusted you and thus agreed to leave the Bing Huo Island to return to the Central Plains."

"He trusted me?" Jin Hua Popo laughed coldly, "What a joke. If he did, why didn't he let me borrow the Saber? He returned to the Central Plains because of his 'yi zi' [adopted/foster child]; what does it have to do with me?"

In the darkness Zhang Wuji vaguely saw Jin Hua Popo's

hunched back. Suddenly he heard a 'clink' noise as she pounded a metal nail with a mountain rock in front of her. A moment later the same noise was heard again. Zhang Wuji felt very strange; but he was afraid he might be detected by these two women, so he did not dare to move forward to take a closer look.

He heard Yin Li say, "Popo, if you want to take his treasured weapon away then fight him with a saber or a spear; that won't be considered a hero's misdeed. If the present matter is known, how can you not be the laughingstock of the heroes and warriors of the world? Besides, that Miejue Shitai has already died; what use is the Tulong Saber to you?"

Jin Hua Popo was angry; she straightened up her back and said in a stern voice, "Little girl, who rescued your insignificant life from the hands of your father? Now that you are a grown up, you don't want to listen to Popo anymore! This Xie Xun is neither your friend nor your relative, why are you so adamant in protecting him? Give Popo a good reason." Although her tone was grim, but her voice was actually low; apparently she was afraid Xie Xun on the mountain peak might hear her. Actually, the distance between that place and the peak was very far, it was a slim chance Xie Xun might hear her as long as she did not shout using her internal energy.

'Clank, clank!' Yin Li threw the bag she was carrying on the ground, and then she moved three steps backwards.

"Well?" Jin Hua Popo sternly said, "Your wings have grown, and now you want to fly, don't you?"

Although watching from the darkness, Zhang Wuji could see her eyes shine with an intimidating power, like a cold piercing thunder.

“Popo,” Yin Li said, “It’s not that I dare to forget your great kindness in saving my life and teaching me martial arts. But Xie Daxia is his ... is his Yifu.”

Jin Hua Popo let out a hollow laugh. “Surprisingly there is such an idiot like this in the world,” she said, “That boy surnamed Zhang has fallen into a ten-thousand ‘zhang’s ravine in the Western Region. You have heard it with your own ears from Wu Lie and Wu Qingying. If you don’t believe me, just capture those people and torture their confessions out. They have told us clearly; don’t tell me you think they were lying? That boy surnamed Zhang’s skeleton has turned into ashes by this time, and you still cannot forget him?”

“Popo,” Yin Li said, “I cannot cast him aside from my heart. Perhaps, this is what you said about some ... some debt from the previous life.”

Jin Hua Popo heaved a sigh and said, “Let’s not talk about that boy was not willing to come with us to the Ling She Island; even if he agreed to marry you, he’s dead now. What are you going to do? Luckily he died early; if he did not die and see your appearance, how could he love you? You would helplessly see him fall in love with some other woman; how would you feel then?”

The tone of these last few sentences was greatly moderated. Yin Li was silent; obviously she could not give her any answer. Jin Hua Popo continued, “Let’s not talk about other women, even our captive, that Emei Pai’s Miss Zhou, is very pretty. If that boy surnamed Zhang saw her, his heart would have been stirred. Would you then kill Miss Zhou, or would you kill that boy? Hm, hm, if you didn’t practice this ‘hand of thousand spiders ten thousand poison’ [‘qian zhu wan du shou’], you were actually a beautiful woman; but now? There

is nothing we can do.”

“He has already died, my face has already been destroyed; what else can I say?” Yin Li said, “But Xie Daxia is his Yifu. Popo, we cannot hurt a single strand of his hair. Popo, I beseech you on this matter only; otherwise, I will listen to you.” While saying that, she bent her knees to kneel down.

Zhang Wuji was secretly astonished, “I became the new Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu and have already caused quite a stir in the Wulin; how come these two actually know nothing about it?” he thought, “Hmm, that’s right; it must be that they went to the far away Bing Huo Island to get my Yifu. The round trip journey took a really long time. This time they came back to Dadou without having any communication with anybody; no wonder they have not heard about me.”

Jin Hua Popo hesitated a moment before answering, “Very well, you stand up!”

“Many thanks, Popo!” Yin Li happily said.

“I promise you not to harm his life, but I must take the Tulong Saber from him ...” Jin Hua Popo said.

“But ...” Yin Li said.

“Don’t fuss and make Popo angry,” Jin Hua Popo cut her off. Her hand moved and a ‘clink’ noise was heard again.

Zhang Wuji saw Jin Hua Popo’s hands were moving swiftly; successive ‘clink, clink’ noises were heard nonstop, farther and farther away. Yin Li sat on a rock with her head in her hands, sobbing softly. Zhang Wuji was very appreciative seeing, unexpectedly, that she has such a deep feeling toward him.

A moment later Jin Hua Popo shouted from about ten 'zhang's away, "Bring them here!" Yin Li had no choice but to take the two sacks and bring them to Jin Hua Popo.

Zhang Wuji crept forward several feet and looked; he was greatly shocked for he saw steel spikes seven, eight inches long were planted on the ground, among the rocks, about two, three feet apart. The sharp points of the spikes were facing upward; they looked very sharp, flickering with dim rays. The more Zhang Wuji thought about it, the more he was shocked. Apparently Jin Hua Popo was going to fight the Golden Mane Lion King, but she was afraid she might not be his match. If she launched secret projectiles, Xie Xun would be able to hear and evade; but steel spikes scattered on the ground were without noise and without movement. All she needed to do was lure him into the trap; how would a blind man like him be able to withstand the spikes?

Zhang Wuji's anger flared up; he was about to reach out and pull the steel spikes and unmask her plot, but he changed his mind. "This wicked Popo calls my Yifu 'Xie San Ge'; in the past they must have had unusual friendship," he thought, "I'll wait till she fights Yifu face to face, then I'll expose her trick. Today the Heaven has led me, Zhang Wuji, to this place, so that Yifu may not suffer any harm." Thereupon he sat on a rock, hugging his knees, waiting quietly for what would happen.

Suddenly he heard a rustling noise amidst the blowing wind, like a falling leaf on a rock. He knew a martial art master with high 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was quietly coming near. Turning his head around he saw a shadow moving stealthily; it was no other than the Beggar Clan's Elder, Chen Youliang. He had a curved saber in his hand, with its blade wrapped in cloth to avoid it from reflecting any light. Zhang Wuji mused how accurate Zhao Min's prediction was;

this man was indeed not a good person.

“Xie San Ge!” Jin Hua Popo shouted, “There is a dog thief who is not afraid of death coming here looking for you!”

Zhang Wuji was startled, he thought Jin Hua Popo was very good; could it be that his presence had already been detected? Reasonably said, it would not be the case. He saw Chen Youliang was crouching among the tall grass, without daring to make any movement. Zhang Wuji crept carefully several more ‘zhang’s forward; he wanted to get as close as possible to his Yifu, to guard him against Jin Hua Popo’s deceit and to offer his assistance as quickly as possible.

Not too long afterwards, a shadow of a big and tall man appeared from the hut on the mountain peak. Xie Xun walked slowly down the hill, and stopped several ‘zhang’s away from Jin Hua Popo. All along he did not utter a single word.

“Hey, hey,” Jin Hua Popo said, “Xie San Ge, you are utterly suspicious toward an old acquaintance, yet you readily believed a total stranger. This fellow Chen Youliang, whom you let go today, has come looking for you.”

Xie Xun coldly replied, “An open spear is easy to avoid, a hidden sword is hard to guard against. All my life Xie Xun has often suffered under those people close to me. That Chen Youliang is looking for me; what does he want?”

“This kind of treacherous lowly man, why would we want to care about him?” Jin Hua Popo said, “This afternoon you spared his life; do you know what position did his hands and feet take? His hands were in the ‘shi zi bo tu’ [the lion catches the rabbit] position, while his feet were in the ‘jiang mo ti dou shi’ [devil-subduing kicking style]. Ha ha ha ha

...!" Her speaking voice was clear and crisp, pleasant to the ears; but her laughter was sad and shrill like those of a crying owl in the deep of the night.

Xie Xun was startled for he knew Jin Hua Popo was not lying. Because of his blindness, he had fallen into Chen Youliang's scheme. He wryly said, "It was not the first time I was taken advantage of by others. Lowly people like that are a dime a dozen in the Jianghu; I kill one more or one less, what difference does it make? Mrs. Han, you can be considered my good friend; you saw it, but chose to ignore it, and only now did you come and tell me. Are you trying to incite my anger?" Having finished speaking, he suddenly jumped toward Chen You Liang with an unbelievable speed.

Chen You Liang was shocked; he brandished his saber to hack. Xie Xun bent his left hand and snatched the saber away. 'Slap, slap, slap!' He successively slapped Chen Youliang's ears three times; then his right hand grabbed the back of his neck and lifted him up. "If I want to kill you now, it would be as easy as killing a chicken," he said, "But Xie Xun has given his words, letting you go and come back in ten years. If I see you again before that time on this island, I am going to take your dog's life away." Waving his hand, he threw Chen Youliang away.

Right away Chen Youliang's body flew toward the spikes on the ground. If he fell down to the ground, the spikes would certainly pierce his body; and then Jin Hua Popo's all-night effort would be wasted. Immediately Jin Hua Popo flew forward and hit Chen Youliang's waist with her walking stick, sending him off several more 'zhang's to the side.

"If you dare to tread your feet even for one step on my Ling She Island, I am going to kill a hundred of your Beggar Clan disciples," she shouted, "Jin Hua Popo has always been true

to her words. Today I'll let you enjoy one of my golden flowers ['jin hua'] first." With a wave of her left hand a golden light streaked by. 'Puff!' a golden flower pierced the 'jia che xue' [jawbone acupoint] on Chen Youliang's left cheek, rendering him unable to speak momentarily, so that her secret plan would not be revealed.

Pressing his left cheek with his hand, Chen Youliang scurried downhill. By this time Xie Xun was only several 'zhang's away from the spikes. Zhang Wuji was crouching behind him. Only Zhang Wuji's internal energy was much higher than Chen Youliang's; he was able to regulate his breathing in such a way that Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo were not aware of his presence.

Jin Hua Popo turned around and praised, "Xie San Ge, your ears are as sharp as your eyes were. Hereafter you can arouse your heroic manner and wander unhindered in the Jianghu for twenty more years."

"I was not able to see the 'shi zi bo tu' and the 'jiang mo ti dou shi'," Xie Xun replied, "As long as I know what really happened to my child Wuji, I will die with my eyes closed. The blood debts Xie Xun bears on his body are as high as the mountain. I deserve to die a miserable death, why would I want to wander unhindered in the Jianghu?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed and said, "For a Ming Jiao Hu Jiao Fa Wang [The Protector King of the Ming Cult], killing several people is nothing. Xie San Ge, let me borrow your Tulong Saber." Xie Xun shook his head without saying anything.

Jin Hua Popo said again, "This place is no longer a secret; you can't stay here any longer. Let me find another safe place for you to stay for a few months. Lend me the Tulong Saber so I can defeat my archenemy from the Emei Pai; and

then I will seek Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang] with all my might. Based on my skill, finding Zhang Gongzi and bringing him to your presence should not be a difficult matter.” Again Xie Xun shook his head.

Jin Hua Popo continued, “Xie San Ge, do you still remember the ‘si da fa wang, zi bai jin qing’ [four great protector kings, purple white golden and (dark) green], these eight characters? Remember how the four of us were under Yang Jiaozhu’s [Cult Leader Yang] command, the ‘Ying Wang Yin Er Ge’ [Eagle King, Second (older) Brother Yin], ‘Fu Wang Wei Si Ge’ [Bat King, Fourth (older) Brother Wei], and the two of us, ran amuck in the world, nobody could stop us? Today our great aspirations have grown old; can you let your ‘zi shan lao mei zi’ [purple robe old (younger) sister] being bullied without you lending a hand?”

Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised, “Listening to her, is it possible that she is unexpectedly the chief of our Cult’s Four Protector Kings, the ‘zi shan long wang’ [Purple Robe Dragon King]? Could there be such a coincidence in the world? How can she call Wei Fu Wang [Bat King Wei] ‘si ge’ [fourth (older) brother]?”

He heard Xie Xun sigh and say, “Those are all past events; why do you raise them up? Old, we are all old!”

“Xie San Ge,” Jin Hua Popo said, “My old eyes are not blind yet; do you think I cannot see that in these last twenty years your martial art skill has advanced greatly? Why be so modest? In our whole lives we haven’t had too many good days. I’ll say before the Ming Jiao Si Da Fa Wang die, we have to join hands and attempt to achieve a great undertaking in the Jianghu.”

Xie Xun sighed said, “Yin Er Ge [second (older) brother Yin]

and Wei Si Di [fourth (younger) brother Wei] might not necessarily still alive today. Especially Wei Si Di; the cold poison in his body was difficult to eliminate. I am afraid he is no longer alive.”

Jin Hua Popo laughed and said, “This time you might be wrong. Let me tell you honestly, at this time Bai Mei Ying Wang [White-browed Eagle King] and Qing Yi Fu Wang [Green-winged Bat King] are both on the Brightness Peak.”

“They went back to the Brightness Peak?” Xie Xun wondered, “What are they doing?”

“This Ah Li has seen it with her own eyes,” Jin Hua Popo said, “Ah Li is Yin Er Ge’s granddaughter. She offended her father and he wanted to kill her. The first time it was I who saved her; the second time it was Wei Si Ge. Wei Si Ge was taking her to the Brightness Peak, but along the way I stole her away. Ah Li, tell Xie Gong-gong [grandfather, a respectful term to address a senior] how the six major sects besieged the Brightness Peak.”

Thereupon Yin Li narrated briefly what happened in the western region. Only she was taken away by Jin Hua Popo before reaching the Brightness Peak, so that she did not have any recollection of the later incidents.

The more Xie Xun listened to her, the more anxious he became, “What happened next? What happened next?” he asked repeatedly. In the end he got angry, “Mrs. Han,” he said, “Although you did not get along with our brethrens very well because of your marital issue, our Cult is in difficulty, how could you stand as a spectator? Yang Jiaozhu was your Yifu. Have you forgotten how he treated you? Look at Yin Er Ge and Wei Si Di, Wu San Ren [the five wanderers] and the Five-Element Flag; didn’t they all come to the

Brightness Peak to fight?”

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, “Without the Tulong Saber, I was defeated by Emei Pai’s Old Nun Mie jue. Even if I went to the Brightness Peak, I still didn’t have a face to fight her; then why should I have gone?”

The two of them were silently standing facing each other. After a while Xie Xun asked, “How did you find out where I was? You have always been unwilling to speak plainly. Was it the Wudang Pai people?”

“How would the Wudang Pai people know?” Jin Hua Popo said, “When pressed by people of various sects, Zhang Cuishan, husband and wife, would rather kill themselves than revealing your hiding place, naturally Wudang disciples did not know. All right, I am not going to conceal anything from you today: in the western region I met by accident someone by the name of Wu Lie. He is a descendant of Wu Santong, a disciple of Duan Family from Dali. Quite by chance I overheard him talking to his daughter; from which I deduced the subject of their conversation. Thereupon I tortured him to tell me everything.”

Xie Xun was silent for half a day before saying, “This man surnamed Wu has met my child Wuji, hasn’t he? I believe he deceived that child to reveal my secret.”

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji was really ashamed, remembering how he was cheated at the ‘Zhu Jia Zhuang [Zhu Family Village], how Zhu Zhang Ling and Zhu Jiu Zhen, father and daughter, had used deceit to obtain the secret from him. If his Yifu had suffered any harm because of him, he would never atone for that guilt even if he had to die ten thousand times. Although his Yifu was blind, his ability to see things through was like those of seeing people.

Xie Xun continued, "The Six Major Sects besieging the Ming Cult is not a small matter; what happened to our Cult next?"

Jin Hua Popo replied, "The rise or fall, prosperity or decline, of the Ming Cult has nothing to do with Lao Po Zi. In the past, everybody on the Brightness Peak made things difficult for me. You might not remember that, but Lao Po Zi will never forget it. At that time only Yang Jiaozhu and you, Xie San Ge, who were good to me; that also I will not forget."

"Ay, personal grudge is a small matter, protecting our Cult is important," Xie Xun said, "Mrs. Han, you are rather narrow-minded."

Jin Hua Popo was angry, "You are a real man, I am only a narrow minded, unethical woman. When I left the Cult, I swore that I would have nothing to do with the Ming Cult. How could that Hu Qingniu treat me as an outsider if this was not so? Why did he compel me to return to the Ming Cult before he would be willing to treat the poison from Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf]? I was the one who killed Hu Qingniu. Zi Shan Long Wang has violated the Ming Cult's major law. How can I have any relation with the Ming Cult?"

Xie Xun shook his head. "Mrs. Han," he said, "I understand what's in your heart. You want to borrow my Tulong Saber; you said you wanted to deal with the Emei Pai, but actually you want to deal with Yang Xiao and Fan Yao. You have never forgotten your desire to enter the Brightness Peak via the secret passage. That gives me even more reason not to lend the Saber to you."

Jin Hua Popo coughed several times. "Xie San Ge," she said, "How was your martial arts compared to mine in the past?"

“Four Great Protector Kings, each one has their own strengths and weaknesses,” Xie Xun replied.

“But now you have lost your eyes; how would you fare compared to Lao Po Zi?” Jin Hua Popo asked.

Xie Xun fearlessly said, “You want to take the Saber by force, don’t you? With the Tulong Saber in his hand, Xie Xun will overcome the loss of his eyes.” Exhaling a long breath he moved one step forward; the pupils of his blind eyes were aimed at Jin Hua Popo imposingly.

Yin Li was intimidated; she withdrew several steps backward. Jin Hua Popo, with her hunchback, was standing up supported by her walking stick; occasionally she would let out one or two coughs, as if as soon as Xie Xun stretched out his hand, the Saber would be able to chop her into two pieces. But she stood motionless, as if she completely ignored Xie Xun.

Zhang Wuji had seen her in action several times; her speed was truly unbelievable. Probably she was slightly inferior to Wei Yixiao, but her movement was very strange, like a demon or a ghost; totally unpredictable. This moment Xie Xun and she were facing each other; one was like a drawn sword or bent bow, ready to spring into action; the other was like an enlightened sage, totally calm and at ease in the face of danger.

Zhang Wuji thought that since her position was above his (maternal) grandfather, his Yifu and Wei Fu Wang, her martial art skill must be very high; he could not help but secretly feel anxious for Xie Xun.

The wind was howling, the sound of the waves of the sea were faintly heard; adding some chill in the air to this

already suspenseful situation. Two people stood less than a 'zhang' away facing each other, but neither one was willing to make the first move.

After a long time, Xie Xun suddenly said, "Mrs. Han, today you are forcing me to fight you, breaching the oath we made as the Four Protector Kings of the olden days, Xie Xun is really in pain."

"Xie San Ge," Jin Hua Popo said, "You are always soft-hearted; I can't believe those countless famous Wulin's heroes and warriors were killed single-handedly by you."

Xie Xun sighed, "I bore the enmity of my father, mother, wife and child; hence I disregarded everything," he said, "The one thing I regretted most was with thirteen strokes of 'qi shang quan' [seven injuries fist (technique)] I killed Shaolin Pai's Kong Jian Shen Seng [Divine Monk Kong Jian]."

Jin Hua Popo was awestruck. "Kong Jian Shen Seng really died under your hands?" she asked, "When did you learn that kind of fierce martial art skill?" At first she was confident her hands and feet would be able to deal with Xie Xun, but now she started to feel fear.

"Don't be afraid," Xie Xun said, "Kong Jian Shen Seng took the beating without retaliating. He wanted to use the vast and boundless Dharma to help me cross over from my evil way."

"Hmm," Jin Hua Popo said, "That sounds better. Lao Po Zi can't be compared to Kong Jian Shen Seng. If you used thirteen punches to kill him, you would only need nine, ten punches to handle Lao Po Zi."

Xie Xun took a step backwards, his tone suddenly turned

gentle, he said, "Mrs. Han, at the Brightness Peak you treated me well. As your big brother I was sick, while my wife was weak from giving birth and could not get up. You took care of me with full attention for more than a month. I will always appreciate that." Patting the grey cotton robe he was wearing he said, "I was overseas wearing beast's leather as clothes, you sewed me this outfit, which fits me well inside and outside, showing me that your brotherly love at the Brightness Peak has not changed. Please leave! From now on we are not going to see each other anymore. I only ask you to find information on that child Wuji's whereabouts and then bring him here to me; I will always be indebted to you."

Jin Hua Popo laughed bitterly and said, "You still remember this friendship from the past. Let me be frank to you; ever since Yin Ye Da Ge [big brother Silver Leaf] died, my heart had died with him. It's just that I still have some unresolved gratitude and grudges, so I cannot die just like that, and join Yin Ye Da Ge underground. Xie San Ge, although the people of the Brightness Peak are martial art experts and brilliant strategist, in your 'mei zi's [younger sister - term of endearment] eyes they are nothing. Only you, Xie San Ge, are special in my eyes. Do you know the reason?"

Xie Xun raised up his head and was silent for half a day before he finally shook his head and said, "Xie Xun has always been ordinary and mediocre, he certainly is not worthy of 'xian mei's [worthy (younger) sister] regard."

Jin Hua Popo walked over several steps toward a piece of boulder, and then she slowly sat down. "At the Brightness Peak in those days," she said, "Only Yang Jiaozhu and you, Xie San Ge, are special in my eyes. When I married Yin Ye Xiansheng, only the two of you did not resent my decision."

Xie Xun also sat down and said, "Although Han Da Ge [big

brother Han] was not a member of our Cult, he was a hero. Our brothers dissented to your marriage, they were rather a bit narrow-minded. Ay, they are under siege of the Six Major Sects, I wonder how they are doing?"

"Xie San Ge," Jin Hua Popo said, "You are overseas, but your heart is still in Zhong Tu [central earth]; you have never forgotten your brethren of old. A man's life is only a few decades, which will pass in a flash, why should you always think of others?"

By this time the two of them were only a few feet apart; hence they were able to hear each other's breathing. Xie Xun noticed that Jin Hua Popo would cough every other sentences; he asked, "You suffered lung injury from the frostbite at the 'bi shui han tan' [jade-green water, frozen pool]; from that day until now, you are not completely healed?"

"Each time the weather turns cold, my coughing always gets worse," Jin Hua Popo said, "Hmm, after coughing for dozens of years, I already became accustomed to it. Xie San Ge, I hear your breathing is uneven, is it the injury you suffered from training the 'qi shang quan'? You must take a good care of yourself."

"Many thanks for your attention, Xian Mei," Xie Xun said. Suddenly he raised his head up and called Yin Li, "Ah Li, come over here."

Yin Li came over and greeted him, "Xie Gong-gong."

Xie Xun said, "Use your entire strength and pierce me with your finger."

Yin Li was startled; "I do not dare," she said.

Xie Xun laughed, "Your 'qian zhu wan du shou' won't be able to hurt me, although you are using your entire strength. I simply want to test your skill," he said.

Yin Li still said, "Hai'er [lit. child] do not dare." And then she added, "Xie Gong-gong, since Popo and you are old friends, whatever problem we have right now, why can't we talk it over? We don't have to fight over it."

Xie Xun laughed bitterly, "Just pierce me with your finger," he said.

Yin Li did not have any choice; she wrapped a handkerchief around her right index finger then stabbed Xie Xun's shoulder with it. "Aiyo!" suddenly she called out and stumbled backwards; her body flew for more than a 'zhang' away. 'Bang!' she landed heavily on the ground. She felt as if the bones in her body were broken into pieces.

Jin Hua Popo maintained her composure; "Xie San Ge," she slowly said, "Your heart is so wicked. You are afraid I might have a helper, hence you get rid of her first."

Xie Xun was silent for half a day before saying, "This child is kind hearted. She pricked me with only 20, 30% of her strength, and she wrapped her finger with a handkerchief, so that the 'thousand spiders poison' did not harm me. Very good, very good. Otherwise, the 'thousand spiders poison' would come back and attack her heart; her life would be gone by now."

Listening to these words, Zhang Wuji's back broke into cold sweats; he thought his Yifu plainly stated that he was going to test Yin Li's strength, if she did indeed attack him with all her strength, wouldn't she die a violent death? The Ming Cult people were indeed cruel; even his kind Yifu was no

exception. He did not know Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo had been friends for a long time; obviously they cared of each other. He thought after talking to each other amiably, they would certainly not hold ill feeling toward each other. But with an extra help for Jin Hua Popo, Xie Xun was greatly disadvantaged; hence he wanted to get rid of her preemptively.

“Ah Li,” Xie Xun asked, “Why are you so kind to me?”

“You ... you are his Yifu,” Yin Li said, “Besides ... besides, you came here for his sake. In this world you and I are the only people who remember him.”

“Ah,” Xie Xun said, “I did not expect you to be this kind to my child Wuji; I nearly took your life. You come over here.”

Yin Li struggled up and slowly walked to him. Xie Xun put his lips on her ear and said, “I am going to pass on to you an internal energy cultivation method, which I developed on the Bing Huo Island. It is the essence of my life-long martial art accomplishment.” Without waiting for Yin Li to reply, he recited the theory from top to bottom one time.

Yin Li could not comprehend it completely; she tried desperately to memorize it. Xie Xun was afraid she could not remember, so he recited it two more times. “Have you memorized it?” he asked.

“I have,” Yin Li replied.

“After you train it in five years, you will reap some benefit,” Xie Xun said. “Do you know why I pass this skill on to you?”

Yin Li suddenly cried and said, “I ... I know. But ... but I can’t.”

“What do you know? Why can’t you?” Xie Xun asked sternly. His left palm was on her hair, ready to strike if Yin Li’s answer did not satisfy him.

Covering her face with both hands, Yin Li said, “I know you want me to find Wuji and pass this skill on to him. I know that after I master this skill, you want me to protect Wuji, so that he won’t suffer under evil people’s cruel hands, but ... but ...” After saying two ‘buts’ she broke into a loud cry.

Xie Xun stood up and shouted, “But what? Has my child Wuji encountered any mishap?”

Yin Li threw herself on his bosom and wept. “He ... he has died six years ago in the ... in the western region, he fell down a valley and died.”

Xie Xun was trembling. “Are you ... are you ... serious?” he asked.

“I am,” Yin Li was still crying. “Those Wu Lie, father and daughter, saw it with their own eyes. Seven times did I prick both of them with the ‘qian zhu wan du shou’ and seven times I saved their lives again, until they were suffering in between life and death. They ... they could not tell me a lie.”

When Yin Li recounted Zhang Wuji’s death, Jin Hua Popo was going to stop her; but then she changed her mind, thinking that as Xie Xun heard his Yizi died, his mind would be troubled. True, in the coming fight he would be fiercer by 30%, but also he would be less cautious by 30%; thus increasing the chance he might fall into her steel spikes trap. Therefore, she only laughed coldly and did not say anything.

Xie Xun lifted up his head and let out a loud whistle, while tears stream down his cheeks. Seeing his Yifu and his cousin loved him this much, Zhang Wuji could not contain himself much longer. He was about to come out and make himself known, but suddenly Jin Hua Popo said, "Xie San Ge, since your Yizi, that Zhang Gongzi has already died, why would you hold on to that Tulong Saber? Please lend it to me."

Xie Xun hoarsely said, "You hid the truth from me really well. If you want to take the precious saber, you must take my life first." He gently pushed Yin Li to the side. With a hiss he used the lapel of his robe to wipe his tears, and then tore it and tossed it toward Jin Hua Popo. It was called 'ge pao duan yi' [lit. cutting off the robe, breaking friendship].

Zhang Wuji thought, "I'd better come out and tell them the truth, so that these two will not senselessly injure their 'yi qi' [friendship, code of brotherhood]" He had just finished thinking when suddenly he heard some light breathing noise from the tall grass toward his far left. The noise came from quite a distant away, plus it was very light; if not due to his extremely keen ears, Zhang Wuji would not be able to hear it. His heart was moved, "Could it be that Jin Hua Popo secretly prepared some helpers? I'd better not rashly come forward." In the meantime, he heard the gusts of wind from the Saber, as Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo had started fighting each other.

Xie Xun brandished his precious saber around his body like a black dragon circling around him; sometimes fast, other times slow, with a divine variation. Jin Hua Popo was afraid of the Saber's sharpness; she kept moving in circles some distant away from him. Sometimes Xie Xun would deliberately open up a hole in his defense, trying to entice Jin Hua Popo to enter, but Jin Hua Popo did not buy his trick; she would wait for him to attack, then with extreme

ingenuity she would evade and launch a counterattack.

These two people knew their opponent's martial art very well; victory or defeat would not be easily determined within one or two hundreds moves. Xie Xun relied on the precious saber, while Jin Hua Popo took advantage of his blindness. Each of them was trying to exploit this slight advantage to gain victory. In a way they were having a contest of wits and not of internal energy.

'Swish, swish!' suddenly two yellow rays flashed by; Jin Hua Popo launched two of her 'jin hua' [golden flower]. Xie Xun turned the Tulong Saber around; both 'golden flowers' stuck to the Saber. Turned out the golden flowers were made of pure steel plated with gold; while the Tulong Saber was cast from some 'xuan tie' [black/mysterious iron] with some magnetic property, which attract any ferrous metal.

These golden flowers were the secret projectiles that brought fame to Jin Hua Popo's name, when released, the variation was endless; even if Xie Xun's eyes were not blind he would be hard pressed to evade them. Unexpectedly, this Tulong Saber was the bane of these secret projectiles. Jin Hua Popo moved swiftly to the left and to the right, successively launching eight more golden flowers; all of them stuck to the Tulong Saber.

It was a dark night, with neither the moon nor the stars in the sky; the golden flowers on the Saber looked like several hundreds of fireflies dancing around in the air. Suddenly Jin Hua Popo let out a cough and shot sixteen, seventeen golden flowers at once, so that if Xie Xun intercepted the ones on his east, he would not be able to evade the ones on his west. Xie Xun waved his sleeve and rolled in about seven, eight golden flowers; while intercepted the other eight or so golden flowers with his Tulong Saber.

“Mrs. Han,” he shouted, “Your title is ‘zi shan long wang’, which is a big taboo against this saber. If you have a prolonged contact with it, I am afraid it won’t be to your advantage.”

Jin Hua Popo shivered. For martial art practitioners who live their lives on the blades of the weapons; mostly they paid particular attention to taboos like this. She was known as the ‘long wang’ [dragon king], while the saber was named ‘tu long’ [slaughtering the dragon]; so it was a very unlucky combination. She forced a laughter and said, “Perhaps my ‘sha shi zhang’ [killing-the-lion staff] will kill the blind lion first.” Abruptly her staff shot out.

Xie Xun shrunk his shoulder to evade, but suddenly his foot stumbled. “Ah!” he cried, as the staff hit his left shoulder. Although the force had been dissipated for the most part, the hit was not light by any means.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, he cheered in his heart. He knew Xie Xun pretended he was not fast enough to dodge and thus took the hit; Zhang Wuji thought, “Yifu only needs to shoot the golden flowers in his sleeve, and then use the Tulong Saber in ‘qian shan wan shui’ [thousand mountains ten thousands rivers] to chop randomly. Jin Hua Popo will not dare to block the blade; she will be forced to move to the left. After two steps she won’t be able to move farther; at that time Yifu will use his internal energy to force the golden flowers on the Tulong Saber to shoot forward. Jin Hua Popo will be powerless to evade; most probably she will be seriously hurt.”

He had just finished thinking when yellow rays streaked out, Xie Xun did indeed broadcast the golden flowers rolled inside his sleeve; forcing Jin Hua Popo to withdraw to the

left. Zhang Wuji was watching the fight when suddenly he remembered something. "Aiyo, not good!" he thought, "Jin Hua Popo also has already calculated her steps."

By this time Zhang Wuji had acquired a universal knowledge of the martial art. When these two martial art masters attacked and blocked, not a single one of their movements was outside his anticipation. He saw Xie Xun's 'qian shan wan shui' was successful in forcing Jin Hua Popo to withdraw to the left. With a loud shout Xie Xun shot the dozen or so golden flowers on his precious saber; "Aiyo!" Jin Hua Popo cried out and staggered several steps backwards. Xie Xun was a man of his words; after 'ge pao duan yi' [breaking the friendship], he showed no mercy whatsoever. He leaped forward to pursue, brandishing his saber to strike Jin Hua Popo.

"Watch out!" suddenly he heard Yin Li shouted loudly, "There are sharp spikes underneath your feet!"

Xie Xun heard the shout, and was shocked; but it was too late for him to stop. Suddenly he heard a series of 'swish, swish' noise; more than a dozen golden flowers came his way. Jin Hua Popo was taking advantage as his body was midair and incapable to evade; she wanted to force him to land and thus tread on the sharp spikes.

Xie Xun had no alternative but brandish his saber to block the golden flowers. Suddenly a series of clinking noises were heard; his feet reached the ground, uninjured. He stooped down and groped around. He found out that there were seven, eight inches long of steel spikes planted among the rocks on the ground. He could feel the spikes were very sharp; but someone had already shot the four spikes that his feet were supposed to land on, with gravels, sending the spikes fly away from him. From the wind generated by the

gravels, Xie Xun could tell that the shooter was the youngster from the Gigantic Whale Clan who shot the seven pebbles to help him that afternoon. This man had been hiding nearby, but Xie Xun had not had the slightest idea; if not because of that man's help, he would have been seriously injured by now, and then Jin Hua Popo only needed to butcher what was left of him. Thinking about this possibility, he was unable to restrain cold sweat from trickling down his back.

These two people had both laid a trap to harm their opponent; Xie Xun's shoulder was hit by the staff, Jin Hua Popo was hit by two golden flowers from Xie Xun's saber. Although the injuries were not life-threatening, considering the strength of their opponents, both of them were nonetheless suffering considerable disadvantages.

Jin Hua Popo was coughing badly several times before turning toward the place Zhang Wuji was hiding, "Ju Jing Bang kid," she said, "You have repeatedly interfered with Lao Pozi's business. Quickly give me your name."

Zhang Wuji had not replied when suddenly he saw a yellow ray flashed by and Yin Li grunted as three golden flowers hit her on the vital points on her chest. Turned out Jin Hua Popo had realized that Zhang Wuji's martial art was superior, and if she wanted to punish Yin Li, he would try to thwart it; therefore, she faced and spoke to him, and when he was the least expecting it, she backhandedly shot out some golden flowers.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he flew up and caught two golden flowers midair; and as soon as he landed, he embraced Yin Li in his bosom. Yin Li had not lost her consciousness; seeing a bearded man embracing her, she pushed out and struggled trying to get free, but when she exerted some strength, she

threw up some blood. Zhang Wuji realized immediately what was going on; he quickly pulled the fake beard and moustache, and wiped the makeup from his face, revealing his real face.

Yin Li was dazed; “Ah Niu Gege [big brother Ah Niu],” she called out, “Is it you?”

“It’s me!” Zhang Wuji smiled. Yin Li felt relieved and immediately passed out. Seeing her injury was serious, Zhang Wuji did not dare to pull away the golden flowers; he quickly sealed her ‘shen feng’ [divine grace], ‘ling xu’ [spirit grave], ‘bu lang’ [stepping porch], and other vital acupoints connected to the injury, to protect her main artery.

He heard Xie Xun say with a loud voice, “Sire has lent your hands twice to save me; Xie Xun is greatly indebted.”

With a choking voice Zhang Wuji said, “Yi ... Yi ... You don’t have to ...”

End of Chapter 28.

Chapter 29 - The Hopes of Four Women on the Boat

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Towards the afternoon, suddenly a strong wind came followed by a heavy rain. The small boat was blown southward by the wind. Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao, four people removed their eight shoes and used them to scoop the rainwater accumulated on the boat to the sea.

At that moment, they heard two ‘ding-a-ling’ sounds coming from behind them, and very soon three people had arrived. Zhang Wuji took a glance and saw three people wearing wide robes; two of them were very tall, while the one on the left was a woman. They were approaching with their backs to the moon, so that he could not see their faces clearly; but their robes were embroidered with an image of flaming fire, so obviously they were Ming Cult disciples. Each person had their hands high in the air, with each hand holding a black, about two feet long, tablet. The one, which was the tallest, said in a clear and loud voice, “The Ming Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling [Decree of the Holy Fire] have arrived, Cult Protectors Dragon King and Lion King have not kneeled down, what are you waiting for?”

His accent was terrible; he sounded very stiff. Zhang Wuji was startled; he mused, “Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang] did mention that our Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling has been lost since the time of our thirty-first generation Cult Leader, Shi Jiaozhu. How can it be in these three people’s hands? Is this the genuine Sheng Huo Ling? Are they really our Cult’s disciples?”

Jin Hua Popo said, “I have left the Cult a long time ago, so these four words ‘hu jiao long wang’ [cult protector dragon king] don’t mean anything to me. What is Sire’s honorable name? Is that Sheng Huo Ling the real one or a fake? Where did it come from?”

That man barked, “You have left the Cult; what are you prattling about?”

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, “In all her life Jin Hua Popo has never allowed others to slander her for even half a word; in the past, when Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, even he was 30% respectful toward me. What is your position in the Cult that

you dare to shout and bicker in my face?"

In a sudden movement, the three people's shadow swayed, and simultaneously three left hands moved to grab Jin Hua Popo. She brandished her walking stick, sweeping horizontally toward them. It was unclear how these people moved, but somehow their position changed and Jin Hua Popo's stick had struck empty air and three right hands reached out to the back of her neck; her body shook and she was thrown far away.

Based on Jin Hua Popo's martial art level, even if three highest-skilled martial art masters besieged her, they would not necessarily be able to throw her out in one move like that. But, not only the footwork of these three people in white robes was very strange, their coordination was also near perfection; they were just like one person with three heads and six arms.

"Wow!" Zhang Wuji could not stop from exclaiming. As those three people moved, he was able to see their features clearly; the tallest among them had pointy whiskers, his eyes were bluish green. The other man had blonde moustache and eagle nose. The woman's hair was black, just like the Chinese, but the pupils of her eyes were so pale that they were almost colorless. Her face was watermelon-seed shaped; she was around thirty years of age. Although her features were strange, she looked very beautiful.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Turn out these people are Middle-Easterners; no wonder their accents are so stiff, almost sounds like they are reciting a book."

In a loud and clear voice the man with the pointy whiskers said, "Seeing the Sheng Huo Ling is like seeing the Jiaozhu; Xie Xun, why haven't you knelt down?"

“Who are the three of you?” Xie Xun replied, “If you are Ming Cult disciples, then Xie Xun should know you. If you are not Ming Cult disciples, then Sheng Huo Ling has nothing to do with the three of you.”

“Where is the origin of the Ming Cult?” the pointy whisker asked.

“It came from Persia,” Xie Xun answered.

“Correct, correct!” the pointy whisker said, “I am the ‘Liuyun Shi’ [flowing/spreading (take your pick) cloud emissary] from the Persian Central Ming Cult. These other two are ‘Miaofeng Shi’ [wonderful wind emissary] and ‘Huiyue Shi’ [glorious moon emissary]. We come to the Central Earth [‘zhong tu’] from Persia on assignment from the Central Cult Leader.”

Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji were stunned. Zhang Wuji had read Yang Xiao’s book, the ‘Ming Jiao Liu Chuan Zhong Tu Ji’ [A record on the spread of Ming Cult to the Central Earth]; so he knew the Ming Cult came from Persia. He saw these three people were Persian Middle-Easterners, their martial arts were also this good; so they must be telling the truth.

He heard that blonde-moustache Miaofeng Shi say, “Our Jiaozhu received the news that the Central Earth’s Jiaozhu was missing and the disciples were killing each other, the Cult was declining quickly. He ordered Cloud, Wind and Moon, three Emissaries, to reorganize the Cult’s affairs. All Cult disciples, from the top to the bottom, must receive our commands without fail.”

Zhang Wuji was delighted, “The Central Cult Leader has sent his orders; nothing can be better than that,” he thought,

“Now I don’t have to bear this heavy responsibility with my superficial experience and cause harm on the important matter.”

He heard Xie Xun say, “Even though the Central Earth’s Ming Cult stemmed from Persia, we have become an independent faction for several hundred years; therefore, we are outside the Persian Central Cult’s jurisdiction. The three of you have come from afar to the Central Earth, Xie Xun is very pleased; as for kneeling down and so on, don’t you think it is rather unreasonable?”

The pointy whiskered Liuyun Shi struck the two pieces of black tablets in his hands to each other. ‘Clang!’ The noise was neither those of metals nor jade; it sounded very strange. He said, “This is the Central Earth’s Ming Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling; the former Jiaozhu surnamed Shi was unworthy; he lost it to the outsiders, and now we took it back. Seeing the Sheng Huo Ling is like seeing the Jiaozhu; Xie Xun still does not obey orders?”

When Xie Xun joined the Cult, Sheng Huo Ling had been lost quite a long time, so he had never seen it; but he had heard about its divine features, it was also frequently mentioned in the Ming Cult’s Holy Scripture. Therefore, listening to this unique sound, he knew that the Sheng Huo Ling in that person’s hand was the genuine one. Besides, those three were able to catch and throw Jin Hua Popo away with only one move, which ordinary people would not be able to do; his doubts were gone.

“Subordinate believes what Sire has said,” he said, “I wonder what instructions do you have for me?”

Liuyun Shi waved his left hand; together with Miaofeng Shi and Huiyue Shi they leaped together. In two jumps they

landed by Jin Hua Popo's side. Jin Hua Popo attacked them with some golden flowers; the three Emissaries dodged to the east and swayed to the west; the golden flowers fell to the ground. Huiyue Shi dashed forward with extended finger toward Jin Hua Popo's throat. Jin Hua Popo raised her walking stick to block, followed by a counterattack. Suddenly her body flew up, because her back was grabbed and lifted up by Liuyun Shi and Miaofeng Shi. Huiyue Shi immediately advanced three steps and her palms struck Jin Hua Popo's chest and abdomen three times. The palm strikes were not too heavy, but Jin Hua Popo was immobilized.

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, "These three's movements were not extraordinary, but the ingenuity of their coordination was matchless. Huiyue Shi attacked from the front to entice the enemy and the other two mysteriously come in and out to capture Jin Hua Popo. Strictly speaking, in term of martial art, each one of them is inferior to Jin Hua Popo. That woman's three palm strikes are not really sealing acupoint technique, but it was cunningly comparable to our Central Earth's sealing acupoint technique."

Liuyun Shi grabbed Jin Hua Popo with his left hand and tossed it toward Xie Xun. "Shi Wang [Lion King]," he said, "According to our Cult's law, once somebody enters our Cult, he cannot rebel and leave the Cult. This woman has left the Cult on her own accord; hence she is a traitor. Behead her."

Xie Xun was shocked; "The Central Earth Ming Cult does not have this law," he said.

Liuyun Shi coldly said, "From now on the Central Earth Ming Cult will receive the Persian Central Cult's orders. A traitor who leaves the Cult will bring disaster later on, if left alive. Quickly execute her."

Xie Xun fearlessly said, "The Four Kings of the Ming Cult are no different than sworn brothers and sister. Although she treated the Old Xie ruthlessly today, the Old Xie cannot retaliate cruelly. I cannot harm her."

Miaofeng Shi laughed loudly. "Chinese people are wishy-washy, with so many customs to be observed" he said, "How can you not kill a traitor? Where is the logic in that? What a load of crap!"

"The Old Xie can kill people without batting an eyelid," Xie Xun said, "But I have never killed my fellow Cult disciple."

Huiyue Shi said, "You don't want to kill her that means you are defying order. We will kill you first."

Xie Xun replied, "The three of you came to the Central Earth, and your first order of business is forcing Jin Mao Shi Wang to kill Zi Shan Long Wang, is it because you want to establish authority by intimidation?"

Huiyue Shi showed a faint smile. "Your eyes are blind, but your heart is not," she said, "Hurry up, do it!"

Xie Xun tilted his head up and let out a long laugh; his voice shook the mountain and valley. He loudly said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang has always been frank. Not to mention I won't kill friends and comrades, even if the Old Xie has a deep enmity toward someone, you have already captured and immobilized her; how can the Old Xie kill someone who is unable to fight back?"

Listening to his Yifu's heroic and frank speech, Zhang Wuji cheered inwardly; but he started to loath these Three Emissaries from the Persian Ming Cult.

He heard Miaofeng Shi said, "For the disciples of Ming Cult, seeing Sheng Huo Ling is the same as seeing the Jiaozhu. Do you dare to defy the Cult?"

Xie Xun boldly said, "The Old Xie has been blind for more than twenty years. Even if you place it in front of my eyes, I still cannot see it. What do you mean by 'seeing Sheng Huo Ling is the same as seeing the Jiaozhu'?"

Miaofeng Shi was angry. "Fine! Then have you made up your mind to rebel?"

"The Old Xie has never dared to rebel against the Cult," Xie Xun said, "But the Cult's teaching is to do good and shun evil; 'yi qi' is heavily emphasized. Xie Xun would rather lose his head than do this despicable thing."

Jin Hua Popo was paralyzed, but she heard everything Xie Xun said. Zhang Wuji realized his Yifu was about to face a life and death situation; he immediately laid Yin Li gently on the ground. He heard Liuyun Shi say, "Ming Cult disciples who refuse to follow the Sheng Huo Ling's order will be killed without mercy!"

"I am a Protector King of the Cult," Xie Xun shouted, "Even if Jiaozhu himself want to execute me, he would have to bow to the Heaven and the Earth, and to the Ming Zun [the Ming Cult prophet(?)] in front of the altar and state my crime clearly."

Miaofeng Shi chuckled and said, "The Ming Cult of Persia was fine, but once it arrived at the Central Earth, it has so many of these stinky customs!" All three Emissaries let out a whistle and together they charged forward.

Xie Xun brandished his Tulong Saber, forming a wall in front of his body. The Three Emissaries successively attacked

three times but failed to get close to him. Huiyue Shi managed to sneak in, the tablet in her left hand struck toward the top of Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun raised the Saber to block, 'Clang!' the noise was very strange. No other weapon could match the sharpness of the Tulong Saber; yet it failed to cut the Sheng Huo Ling.

In between strikes, Liuyun Shi rolled down toward the left and hit Xie Xun's leg with his fist. Xie Xun staggered. Right that moment Miaofeng Shi swept his tablet horizontally toward Xie Xun's back, suddenly he felt that his wrist was grabbed and the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand was snatched by someone else. In great surprise he turned around and saw a young man with the Sheng Huo Ling in his right hand.

With an unmatched speed and unbelievable agility Zhang Wuji had managed to jump in and snatch the tablet away. Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi were startled and angered; they attacked together from two sides. Zhang Wuji turned around and dodged to the left; unexpectedly, 'Slap!' his back was squarely hit by the tablet in Huiyue Shi's hand.

The Sheng Huo Ling was made of special material; it was extremely hard. As Zhang Wuji was hit, his vision turned black, he almost passed out. Luckily, the divine energy ['shen gong'] protecting his body was so profound that he managed to control his mind and he dashed three steps forward. The Persian Three Emissaries immediately rushed after him and surround him.

Zhang Wuji attacked Liuyun Shi with the tablet in his right hand, while his left hand swiftly reached out and grabbed the Sheng Huo Ling in Huiyue Shi's hand. Who would have thought that suddenly Huiyue Shi let her hand loose; the Sheng Huo Ling flew upward with the tail first. 'Slap!' it hit Zhang Wuji's wrist. Zhang Wuji felt all five fingers of his left

hand went numb; he had no choice but let the Sheng Huo Ling he just seized to fall down. Huiyue Shi deftly reached out and snatched it back.

Ever since Zhang Wuji learned the 'qian kun da nuo yi' plus receiving Zhang Sanfeng's instructions on the most refined secret of the Taiji Fist, he had been roaming around without any match. Unexpectedly now that he fought Huiyue Shi, a woman, he was hit repeatedly. On the second time, if not of his 'shen gong' reacted naturally to provide protection, his wrist would have been broken. He was wary and did not dare to attack; he stopped and focused his attention to see his opponents' moves more clearly.

The Persian Three Emissaries were also amazed that he was hit twice without sustaining any injury. Miaofeng Shi suddenly bent down and charged toward Zhang Wuji with his head as a battering ram. Using one-self's most important part to strike the enemy was actually a big violation of the martial art theory. Zhang Wuji did not budge from his position; he knew that a clumsy move like this bound to be followed by an exceptionally fierce stance. He waited until the head was only about one foot in front of his body before he finally moved one step backward.

Liuyun Shi suddenly leaped up; trying to land on top of Zhang Wuji's head. It was another weird move; attacking the enemy using one's buttock. Although there were countless strange moves within the martial art world, such a clumsy and seemingly useless stance had never been heard of. Without batting an eyelid, Zhang Wuji stepped sideways to evade. Suddenly he felt pain on his chest, as Miaofeng Shi struck him with his elbow. The 'jiu yang shen gong' [nine-yang divine energy] in Zhang Wuji's body reacted naturally, sending Miaofeng Shi stumbling three steps backward. He was just about to steady his feet when the residue of the

force compelled him to fall back three more steps.

The Persian Three Emissaries' countenances changed in consternation. Huiyue Shi swept the Sheng Huo Ling in her hands horizontally, while Liuyun Shi made three somersaults in the air. Zhang Wuji wondered what his intention was, but he knew he had better evade. He had just moved one step to the left when a white ray of light flashed, and his right shoulder was heavily hit by the Sheng Huo Ling in Liuyun Shi's hand.

It was indeed an unthinkable stance that Zhang Wuji did not the least bit anticipate. Liuyun Shi was obviously somersaulting in the air; how could he suddenly reach out with his Sheng Huo Ling and struck out his shoulder? Zhang Wuji was startled and did not dare to prolong contact. Besides, although his body was protected by the 'jiu yang shen gong', the strike on his shoulder was so heavy that he felt the pain to his bone and marrow. However, he fully realized that if he drew back, his Yifu's life would be difficult to protect. Therefore, he took a deep breath and clenching his teeth he leaped forward; his palm struck toward Liuyun Shi's chest.

At the same time, Liuyun Shi leaped forward and struck the Sheng Huo Ling in his hands to each other. 'Clang!' Zhang Wuji was still in the air; hearing the noise his mind was suddenly disturbed and he fell back down to the ground. He felt a shot of pain on his waist as Miaofeng Shi kicked him. 'Bang!' Miaofeng Shi stumbled backward from the 'jiu yang shen gong' reaction; while Huiyue Shi hit Zhang Wuji's right arm with her Sheng Huo Ling.

All this time Xie Xun was standing on the side, listening to the fight. He knew this young man from the Gigantic Whale Clan had already hit several times and was presently

exhausted. Xie Xun regretted his blindness that he was helpless to step forward and lend his hand. He was very anxious; if he was fighting alone, he would be able to distinguish the enemy's weapon, fist or kick by listening to the wind. But if he was fighting alongside a friend, how could he tell whether it was the friend's fist or kick, or it was the enemy's weapon? He could brandish his Tulong Saber; but wouldn't he be greatly distressed if he inadvertently hacked down his own friend?

"Shao Xia! [young hero]" he called out, "Please back off. This is the Ming Cult's business; it has nothing to do with you, Sire. Shao Xia has repeatedly helped me today; Xie Xun is deeply grateful."

Zhang Wuji shouted, "I ... I ... Go away quickly! Please listen to me, go away!"

Right away Liuyun Shi struck with his Sheng Huo Ling. Zhang Wuji parried with the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand. 'Clunk!' Two Sheng Huo Ling struck each other, the noise was unbearable, it sounded like a slaughtered animal or grating metals. Liuyun Shi could not hold his grip, his Sheng Huo Ling flew up. Zhang Wuji quickly leaped up trying to snatch it; but suddenly 'Rip!' a large portion of the clothes on his back was grabbed by Huiyue Shi. Her fingernails created several lines of claw cuts on Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji was in so much pain that his action was slowed down and Liuyun Shi managed to snatch the Sheng Huo Ling back.

The fight went on for several more stances. Zhang Wuji realized that in terms of strength, these three were far inferior to him, but their martial art was very strange, and their weapons were mysterious, almost magical. But it was their collaboration that was the most difficult to deal with; it

was like a formation, but not quite a formation, like choreographed movements, but not quite like it. It was mysterious and ruthless, beyond imagination. He knew that as long as he could strike one of them, he would win the battle. But whenever he attacked one, the other two would launch a converging attack to help their comrade. Zhang Wuji kept changing his style, but throughout he was unable to break these three people's defense; instead, he was hit twice by the Sheng Huo Ling. Luckily, for the Persian Three Emissaries, this was the first time their fists and kicks bounced back to hurt them each time they attacked; after a while they did not dare to make fists and kicks contact with him anymore.

With a loud shout Xie Xun leaped forward, holding the Tulong Saber in front of his chest. He came near Zhang Wuji and said, "Shao Xia, use this Saber!" while handing the Saber over to him.

Zhang Wuji thought that with this precious saber's invincible power, he might be able to repel the enemy; hence he took the Saber immediately. Xie Xun's right foot kicked down to jump backward, but within a split second his back was heavily hit by Miaofeng Shi's fist, he felt as if his internal organs inside his chest and belly were turned upside down. This fist was without a noise and without a trace; Xie Xun did not hear the least bit of wind.

Zhang Wuji brandished the Saber to hack Liuyun Shi. Liuyun Shi raised both of his Sheng Huo Ling, moved both of his hands, and the Sheng Huo Ling rode on the Tulong Saber. Zhang Wuji felt an intense vibration on his palm and the Tulong Saber almost fell off his hand. He was shocked and hastily added more internal strength to his hand.

It had always been easy for Liuyun Shi to use the Sheng Huo

Ling to seize his opponent's weapon; he had done it thousands of times without failing. This time unexpectedly he failed; he was greatly surprised. Huiyue Shi let out a shrill shout and the Sheng Huo Ling in her hands also rode on the Tulong Saber's blade. Four tablets pulled the Saber together, the force increased.

Zhang Wuji had received seven, eight injuries; although they were all minor, his internal energy had been greatly reduced. At this moment he felt half of his body was feverish, his right hand, which was grabbing the Saber, was trembling. He knew this Saber was his Yifu's lifeline. His Yifu had not found out the truth about him, yet surprisingly he was willing to lend the Saber away, demonstrating his heroic character. Supposing that Zhang Wuji lost the Saber in his hand, how would he still have the face to see his Yifu? Thereupon with a loud grunt he sent out his 'jiu yang shen gong' like a steady stream of energy attacking his enemies.

Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi's faces changed. Miaofeng Shi realized the disadvantageous situation, he moved the remaining Sheng Huo Ling in his hand to also ride on the Tulong Saber. Now Zhang Wuji had to resist three powerful pull on his Saber, yet he was able to hold his ground. He was secretly glad that he managed to snatch the Sheng Huo Ling away from Miaofeng Shi earlier; otherwise, he would be really hard-pressed to resist the six Sheng Huo Ling altogether at the same time.

By this time these four people had reached the stage where they were staking everything in this internal energy tug-of-war. Zhang Wuji thought that this internal energy duel was exactly what he was expecting, since his internal energy was a lot stronger.

For a moment four people stood motionless with each one

exerting his/her internal energy. Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt a shot of pain in his chest as if a very fine sharp needle was pricking his heart and lung. His grip loosened and the five Sheng Huo Ling pulled the Tulong Saber away. Facing this great change, he stayed calm; in one fluid motion he pulled the Yitian Sword from his waist and using the 'yuan zhuan ru yi' [lit. circle/sphere revolving harmoniously] from the Taiji Sword, he made some slanting circles, simultaneously sweeping the Persian Three Emissaries' lower abdomen.

When the Three Emissaries were about to leap back to evade, Zhang Wuji returned the Yitian Sword into its scabbard on his waist, while simultaneously reached out and snatched the Tulong Saber back. These four movements: loosing the Saber, pulling the Sword, returning the Sword, and snatching the Saber back, were executed swiftly, lightning fast; based on the seventh level of 'qian kun da nuo yi'.

"Ah!" the Persian Three Emissaries exclaimed in amazement. Their internal energy was not as strong as Zhang Wuji's; as soon as they opened their mouths, three Sheng Huo Ling were pulled away by the Tulong Saber. Three people quickly exerted their internal energy to pull back the Sheng Huo Ling; once again the four of them were locked in a stalemate situation.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt that pricking pain in his chest again. This time he had anticipated the attack, so that his grip on the precious saber was not loosened. These two attacks were tangible, he could feel it; but in reality they were formless attacks. A thread of cold air broke through his 'jiu yang shen gong' defense line, straight to his internal organs. He knew it was the Persian Three Emissaries' cold 'yin' internal energy, concentrated into a singular point and entered his body via the Sheng Huo Ling.

When a 'yin' type of energy attack a 'yang' one, it might not necessarily be able to penetrate the 'jiu yang shen gong' defense. However, his 'jiu yang shen gong' was protecting his whole body, while the 'yin' energy was concentrated like a thin silk thread, drilling through his defense system. It was difficult to guard against, as well as difficult to bear. For example, the elephant has great strength, yet even a woman or a small child will be able to prick its skin with a small embroidered needle. As the 'yin' energy entered the body, it would disperse immediately; but this prick could really cause the pain to enter the bones.

Huiyue Shi successively sent out two attacks of 'tou gu zhen' [bone penetrating needle] internal energy. She was astonished to see the opponent resisted her attacks seemingly without too much effort. Although Miaofeng Shi's left hand was free, his entire strength was actually concentrated to his right arm; so that his left hand was no different from if it was paralyzed.

Zhang Wuji realized that if this deadlock situation continued and while the enemy keep repeatedly sending this needle-like 'yin' energy attacks, he would not be able to hold on in the end; yet he did not have any real idea on how to get out of this situation. He heard Xie Xun's heavy breathing behind him, and realized he was walking step-by-step closer; apparently he meant to strike the enemy to help Zhang Wuji. However, by this time the four people's entire bodies were covered with their internal energy; if Xie Xun struck the enemy, it would be the same as striking Zhang Wuji, and therefore, he did not dare to act recklessly.

"This situation is dangerous," Zhang Wuji thought, "Getting Yifu away from this place is more important." Thereupon with a clear voice he said, "Xie Da Xia, although these

Persian Three Emissaries' martial art is marvelous, it is not difficult for me to escape alone. Would you please leave for the time being, after I'm done, I will return the precious saber to you."

The Persian Three Emissaries were even more alarmed to hear him open his mouth as if nothing happened, while in reality he was exerting his entire internal energy.

Xie Xun asked, "Shao Xia, what is your honored surname and great given name?"

Zhang Wuji thought that if he let himself known, out of his deep love toward him, his Yifu would certainly stake it all to fight the Persian Three Emissaries; hence, controlling his emotion he said, "My surname is Zeng, given name Ahniu. Xie Da Xia, you haven't left; could it be that you are afraid I might embezzle your treasured saber?"

Xie Xun laughed aloud and said, "Zeng Shao Xia [young hero Zeng], you don't need to incite me. You and I have the same guts; Xie Xun is very happy that in his sunset years he can have a friend like you. Zeng Shao Xia, I am going to use the 'qi shang quan' [seven-injury fist (technique)] to strike that woman. As I send out my strength, you can let the Tulong Saber go."

Zhang Wuji knew the fierceness of his Yifu's 'qi shang quan'. As long as he was willing to let the Tulong Saber go, one fist from his Yifu would send Huiyue Shi to her violent death. On the other hand, his Cult would develop a very deep enmity with the Persian Central Cult. Zhang Wuji had always been earnestly admonishing his brethrens to live in harmony with their fellow Cult disciples; if today without any reason he killed one of the Central Cult's emissaries, how could he continue to be the Cult Leader? Thereupon he hastily said,

“Hold on!”

Toward Liuyun Shi he said, “Let us hold our hands for a moment, I have something I’d like to say to the three of you.” Liuyun Shi nodded.

Zhang Wuji continued, “I have a close relationship with the Ming Cult. The three of you have the Sheng Huo Ling in your hands then you are our honored guests. Just now I offended you; for which I apologize. Let us pull our internal energy back together and stop fighting; what do you say?”

Liuyun Shi repeatedly nodded his head. Zhang Wuji was delighted; he pulled his strength back and pulled the Tulong Saber to the front of his chest. He felt the Persian Three Emissaries were also pulling their internal energy back; but suddenly a whiff of ‘yin’ energy – like a saber, like a sword, like a dagger, like a chisel, struck straight into the ‘yu tang xue’ [jade hall acupoint] on his chest.

This time, although the cold ‘yin’ energy was still formless and invisible, it felt like a steel blade’s stab. In an instant Zhang Wuji was suffocated, his body was paralyzed; several thoughts flashed in his mind, “After I die, it will be difficult for Yifu to escape their cruel hands. I can’t believe the Persian Central Cult’s emissaries do not give any thought to good faith. I wonder if my cousin Yin Li is going to live... What will happen to Miss Zhao and Miss Zhou? Xiao Zhao, ay, poor little child! What will happen to our Cult’s great undertaking of driving the Yuan away?” He saw that Liuyun Shi raised the Sheng Huo Ling in his right hand, ready to strike the top of his head. Zhang Wuji quickly circulated his internal energy, trying to attack the ‘yu tang xue’ on his chest, but he felt the energy flow was sluggish.

Suddenly a loud female voice was heard, “The Central Earth

Ming Cult battle force has arrived!” Liuyun Shi was startled, his hand halted in midair and did not strike down. A grey shadow flashed by, pulled the Yitian Sword on Zhang Wuji’s waist, and swept toward Liuyun Shi’s chest.

Although Zhang Wuji’s body was immobilized, he could see clearly that this person was Zhao Min. He was delighted, but his delight quickly turned into shock, because the stance she was using was Kunlun Pai’s deathly stance called the ‘yu sui kun gang’ [jade shattered over Kunlun (mountain) ridge]; it was the stance to kill the enemy without any regard of one self’s safety. Although Zhang Wuji did not know the name of this stance, he knew that by using this move plus the Yitian Sword’s sharpness, she would certainly inflict harm to Liuyun Shi, but it would also difficult for her to escape the enemy’s cruel hand.

Liuyun Shi could see immediately the fierceness of this sword attack. It would be difficult for him to save himself, let alone thinking of joining hands with the other Emissaries to launch a converging attack. In his desperation he raised his Sheng Huo Ling to block with all his might, followed by throwing himself on the ground and rolled away. ‘Bang!’ the Sheng Huo Ling managed to divert the Yitian Sword, but he felt a breeze of his left cheek. Without knowing whether he was dead or still alive he stood up and traced his cheek; he felt something wet and sticky, and extremely painful. Turned out the beard and whiskers on his left cheek, along with a piece of his skin, had been sliced by the Yitian Sword. If not because of the special material Sheng Huo Ling was made of, half of his skull would be sliced by this Yitian Sword strike.

When Zhang Wuji left to see Xie Xun, Zhao Min kept thinking that Jin Hua Popo was hiding a lot of craftiness; plus, Chen Youliang’s actions were suspicious. She was

anxious over his safety; therefore, she quietly followed behind. She knew her own 'qing gong' was inferior, hence if she came too close she would be discovered in no time. She stayed some distance away and did not come close until Zhang Wuji was fighting the Persian Three Emissaries.

When Zhang Wuji was engaged in internal energy duel against the Three Emissaries, she was delighted; thinking that although these three foreigners' martial art was weird, in term of internal energy, no way would they surpass Zhang Wuji's 'jiu yang shen gong'. When Zhang Wuji suddenly called out to hold their hands, Zhao Min was about to call him to be careful, but the enemy had already launched the 'yin feng dao' ['yin' wind saber] that Zhang Wuji was hurt and he fell down. In her anxiety she disregarded everything and dashed out, snatched the Yitian Sword and brandished it with Kunlun Pai's suicidal stance she saw in the Wan An Temple earlier.

Zhao Min succeeded in forcing Liuyun Shi away, but the Yitian Sword had bounced back and slashed her own hat, exposing a cluster of her beautiful hair. Her Sword made a slanted circle as she threw herself toward Miaofeng Shi, while her Yitian Sword followed behind.

This move was called the 'ren gui tong tu' [man and ghost travel together], a Kongtong Pai suicidal move, similar to Kunlun Pai's 'yu sui kun gang'; both were used as one was certain he or she would definitely lost, then his or her only hope would be to die together with the enemy. Shaolin and Emei, two Buddhist sects did not have this kind of desperate stances. Those who launched 'yu sui kun gang' and 'ren gui tong tu' were not trying to score a victory amidst a defeat, or to seek life amidst deaths; but they deliberately wounded themselves to perish together with the enemy. When the masters of Kunlun Pai and Kongtong Pai were imprisoned,

they were humiliated by being forced to contend in martial arts while their internal energy was gone. Because they knew it was impossible for them to score any victory, some hot-tempered masters had used these kinds of stances. Unfortunately, their strength was not enough and they failed in their attempts, giving Zhao Min the opportunity to memorize these stances, one-by-one, in her heart.

Seeing her coming his way in this violent manner, Miaofeng Shi was shocked; his body turned cold and he froze. Although his martial art skill was high, his courage was lacking. Seeing this kind of move, he was unable to parry; he was so intimidated that he stood as stiff as a corpse, with hands froze in the air, waiting for death. In the meantime, Zhao Min's body had already reached the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand; shaking out her Sword, she stabbed Miaofeng Shi's chest.

The principle of this stance was throwing one's body to the enemy's weapon first, and then, as the weapon, be it saber or sword, spear or axe, was still in one's body that the enemy's movement was temporarily delayed, one would stab one's sword. Even if the enemy's martial art skill were higher, they would not be able to escape.

Miaofeng Shi was scared to death to see this fierce attack. Fortunately, the weapon in his hand was the Sheng Huo Ling, which looked like an iron ruler, without any sharp edge. As Zhao Min's body landed on the weapon, she was unharmed. Her Sword had barely stabbed forward when her back was grabbed by Huiyue Shi. The Persian Three Emissaries' collaboration in fighting the enemy together was truly marvelous beyond imagination.

Zhao Min's two suicidal moves had thrown three martial art masters into confusion; until this time, Huiyue Shi only

managed to grab Zhao Min's back. Her grab seemed ordinary, but actually it was very accurate and swift like a meteor. Although Zhao Min's sword was also swift and fierce, it still failed to reach Miaofeng Shi's body in the end.

As Zhao Min felt her arm tighten, she knew something was amiss, she did not resist the pull, she let her body fall backwards at the same time turned her sword around and stabbed her own lower abdomen. This suicidal stance was even fiercer than the previous ones; it was a part of Wudang Pai's sword technique called the 'tian di tong sui' [heaven and earth live together]. Actually, it was not created by Zhang Sanfeng, but came from Yin Liting's painstaking effort; he meant to use it against Yang Xiao. Ever since Ji Xiaofu died, he could think nothing else but how to kill Yang Xiao to avenge her death; yet he realized his martial art skill was not Yang Xiao's match. Although his Shifu was the number one martial artist in the world, his own intelligence and perception was limited; his comprehension was only about 30, 40% of his Shifu's skill. In any case, after killing Yang Xiao he did not think to live anyway, hence on the Wudang mountain he painstakingly thought of several moves, which might enable him to kill the enemy while disregarding his own life.

Yin Liting trained his sword in secret. One time Zhang Sanfeng saw him. He sighed, knowing that whatever he said, Yin Liting could not be persuaded. Thereafter he named this stance 'tian di tong shou', meaning that after someone dies, the spirit becomes immortal, it will live for tens of thousand springs (season). Hence, in actuality, it was a solemn and stirring sword move to take away the shell in which that spirit resides.

Yin Liting's senior disciple was trying to use this stance at the Wan An Temple; luckily Fan Yao saved him. Zhao Min saw

it and this time she used it. This move could be used to kill an enemy who was grabbing one from behind. The sharp sword penetrated one's lower abdomen, straight through to the enemy's lower abdomen; how would Huiyue Shi escape? If Miaofeng Shi was not scared out of his wits and Liuyun Shi was standing close by, then the two of them might be able to save her, since Huiyue Shi and her partners had been working together long enough that they developed an alertness as if they were one person.

They saw the Yitian Sword was about to pierce Zhao Min and Huiyue Shi's lower abdomen. Right at this crucial moment Zhang Wuji succeeded in breaking through his sealed acupoint. Quickly he reached out to seize the Yitian Sword. Zhao Min struggled to free herself from Huiyue Shi's grab. Moving very fast she took the Sheng Huo Ling from Zhang Wuji's hand and threw it far away. 'Swish!' it fell among the sharp steel spikes Jin Hua Popo spread on the ground earlier.

To the Persian Three Emissaries, this Sheng Huo Ling was as important as their lives. Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi disregarded Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min as their enemy; they did not even give any thought to Miaofeng Shi's safety, they jumped toward the steel spike formation to look for the Sheng Huo Ling.

Rushing forward for only a 'zhang' or so, they reached the steel spikes. "Ah!" Huiyue Shi screamed, as she treaded on one of the steel spikes.

It was a moonless night with wind blowing hard, the grass was knee-deep; they could not see the steel spikes and the Sheng Huo Ling. They were forced to get down and pull the spikes while groping around for the Sheng Huo Ling. At that moment Miaofeng Shi called out in alarm, as if he had just awaken from a dream, and leaped forward to follow his

comrades.

In order to save Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min had used these three stances much like a rabbit fighting a falcon; certainly without even give it a thought in advance. Now that the excitement subsided, the more she thought about it, the more she was afraid. "Wah!" she broke into a cry and threw herself in Zhang Wuji's bosom.

Zhang Wuji embraced her with a heart full of gratitude, but he realized that as soon as the Persian Three Emissaries found the Sheng Huo Ling, they would turn around against them. "Let's go quickly!" he hastily said. He turned to return the Tulong Saber to Xie Xun. Carrying the severely wounded Yin Li, he said, "Xie Da Xia, let us temporarily escape from them."

"Right," Xie Xun replied. Stooping down he unsealed Jin Hua Popo's acupoints.

Zhang Wuji thought that after narrowly escaped death, Jin Hua Popo would certainly forget her enmity towards Xie Xun. Four people went down the hill for several 'zhang's when Zhang Wuji thought that although Yin Li was his own cousin, yet a man and a woman should not be too close to each other; thereupon he handed her over so Jin Hua Popo could carry her.

Zhao Min was leading the way, followed by Jin Hua Popo and Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji was the last, to protect them against the enemy. Looking back he saw the Persian Three Emissaries were still stooping down, searching among the long thick patch of grass. Zhang Wuji recalled the thrill of his defeat just now, and his heart shivered in fear; plus he was not sure if Yin Li would survive this severe injury.

While he was still deep in thought, suddenly he heard Xie Xun's angry shout and saw him sending his fist toward Jin Hua Popo's back. Jin Hua Popo reached back to parry, while simultaneously throwing Yin Li to the ground. Zhang Wuji was shocked and flew forward.

"Mrs. Han," Xie Xun barked, "Why do you want to kill Miss Yin?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed coldly, "Whether you killed me or not, that's your business. Whether I want to kill her or not, that's my business. Why do you care anyway?"

"Since I am here," Zhang Wuji said, "I won't let you harm anybody on your whim."

"Haven't you meddled enough in other people business for today, Sire?" Jin Hua Popo asked.

"That's not necessarily your business," Zhang Wuji said, "The Persian Three Emissaries will pursue us here in an instant and you still will not go?"

Jin Hua Popo snorted and ran westward. Suddenly she shot three golden flowers backhandedly toward the back of Yin Li's head. Zhang Wuji stretched out his hand and flicked his fingers. 'Swish, swish, swish!' the sound of golden flowers split the air, flying back toward Jin Hua Popo, stronger than arrows shot from a crossbow.

Jin Hua Popo had already seen his face clearly when Zhang Wuji held Yin Li for the first time and wiped out the beards pasted on his lips. Since realizing this young man's internal energy was surprisingly very profound, she did not dare to reach out and catch; hastily she ducked down to dodge. The three golden flowers swept past her robe and tore away

three big strips of clothes on her back. She was so frightened that her heart was jumping madly; she scurried away without even looking back.

Zhang Wuji reached out to carry Yin Li. Suddenly he heard Zhao Min moan in pain while bending her waist and pressed both hands on her lower abdomen. Hastily he went forward and asked, "What is it?" But then he saw that her hands were full of blood, which was still seeping out from her fingers. Turned out the 'tian di tong shou' had stabbed her abdomen after all.

Zhang Wuji was very shocked and busily asked, "Is the injury deep?"

Right at that moment they heard Miaofeng Shi cheered, "I found it! I found it!"

"Don't mind me!" Zhao Min urged, "Go! Just go!" Zhang Wuji reached out to carry her and rushed downhill.

"To the ship! We escape to the sea!" Zhao Min said.

"Right!" Zhang Wuji responded. With one hand carried Yin Li and the other hand Zhao Min, he sped downhill.

Xie Xun followed close behind; he was secretly astonished, "This youngster is amazing; carrying two adults yet still able to run this fast."

Zhang Wuji was so anxious that he felt his heart go numb. Even if only one of these two girls in his hands would die of her wounds, he would hate himself for the rest of his life. Luckily their bodies were still warm and did not gradually turn cold.

As the Persian Three Emissaries found the Sheng Huo Ling, they rushed to pursue, but these three's 'qing gong' was definitely inferior to Zhang Wuji. It was even greatly inferior compared to Xie Xun's. As Zhang Wuji was nearing the ship, he loudly called out, "Shao Min Junzhu's order: Raise the sail and weigh the anchor, prepare to sail immediately!"

So when he and Xie Xun stepped their feet on the deck, the ship was ready to sail. But the captain must hear from Zhao Min personally; he went forward to ask for instruction.

Zhao Min had lost a lot of blood. With a weak voice she said, "Hear ... hear Zhang Gongzi's order ... do it ..."

The captain immediately complied, the ship set sail that when the Persian Three Emissaries reached the shore, the ship had already sailed dozens of 'zhang's away from the island.

Zhang Wuji laid down both Zhao Min and Yin Li side by side in the cabin. Xiao Zhao helped him take off their clothes to reveal the wounds. Zhang Wuji assessed these two women's conditions; he saw the sword wound on Zhao Min's abdomen was approximately half a 'cun' [1 cun is about 1 inch] deep. Although she was bleeding profusely, her life was not in danger. All of the three golden flowers on Yin Li's chest had hit her vital points; apparently Jin Hua Popo did not attack her half-heartedly. Whether her life could be saved remained very difficult to say. He applied some medicine and wrapped their injuries.

Yin Li remained unconscious, while tears streaming down Zhao Min's face. Zhang Wuji asked how she felt; she merely clenched her teeth without giving an answer.

"Zeng Shao Xia," Xie Xun said, "Old Xie has left the matters

of the world; this time unexpectedly returning to the Central Earth, and still can make an acquaintance with a friend with such a deep 'yi qi', I am happy beyond believe."

Zhang Wuji led him to sit on a chair in the middle of the cabin. He knelt and bowed down, crying, "Yifu, child Wuji is unfilial; has not been able to meet you sooner, causing Yifu to suffer extreme hardships."

"You ..." Xie Xun was shocked, "What did you say?"

"I am your child Wuji," Zhang Wuji said.

But how could Xie Xun believe? "You ... what did you say?" he asked.

"The fist technique starts with a focused attention, intention precedes strength, only then victory will be achieved ..." Zhang Wuji gushed non-stop, reciting the theories Xie Xun passed on to him on the Bing Huo Island just before they bade each other good-bye.

After he recited about twenty sentences or so, Xie Xun was surprised and happy; he grabbed Zhang Wuji's arms and said, "You ... you are really my child Wuji?"

Zhang Wuji stood up and embraced Xie Xun tightly, while trying to control his emotions. Thereupon he narrated in brief important points of what had happened since they parted omitting the fact that he was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. He did not want his Yifu to observe the Cult protocol and did obeisance to him instead.

Xie Xun felt as if he was in a dream; but this time he could not help but believe. "Lao Tian Ye [Heaven, God] has eyes, Lao Tian Ye has eyes!" he repeatedly said.

Suddenly they heard the sailor on watch shouted from the stern, "The enemy ship pursues!"

Zhang Wuji rushed toward the deck and saw on a distant a large ship riding on the wind with five sails open, coming fast toward them. In the dark night he could not see the ship's hull, but the five large white sails were clearly visible. Zhang Wuji looked for a while; he noticed that the enemy's ship was lighter; they were closing the gap rapidly. He was anxious and was at a loss. If it was only the Persian Three Emissaries, then he could fight them inside the cabin. Because of the space limitation, they might not be easily collaborating with one another. Thereupon he moved Zhao Min and Yin Li to the side, took the two big anchors on the deck, and placed them on the middle of the cabin as a barrier, forcing the Persian Three Emissaries to fight one on one.

As he finished the preparation, suddenly a loud explosion was heard; their ship violently leaned sideways, followed by the seawater rise up to the sky and splash into the cabin.

"The enemy ship fires their cannon! The enemy ship fires their cannon!" the sailor on the stern loudly called out. Luckily the cannon missed its target and landed on the water.

Zhao Min beckoned Zhang Wuji and in a low voice said, "We also have cannon!"

Zhang Wuji remembered and immediately rushed to the main deck, ordering the sailors to take away the covers of the cannon and load it with gunpowder and iron cannonball. They lighted the fuse and 'Bang!' the cannonball flew out. These sailors were Zhao Min's warriors in disguise; their

martial art skills were not weak, however they knew nothing about artillery or naval battle; the cannonball landed in between two enemy ships. Column of water rose up several 'zhang's to the sky, but the enemy's ships were not even swayed. Fortunately, as the enemy saw that they also have guns, they did not dare to get too close.

Not too long afterwards, the enemy ship fired another round. This time it hit the bow and immediately their ship caught fire. Zhang Wuji busily directed the sailors to draw water to fight the fire. Suddenly he saw the fire had reached one of the upper deck's cabins. With both hands carried two buckets of water, he kicked the cabin door open and splashed the water to extinguish the fire. Amidst the smoke he saw a woman lying on the bed. It was Zhou Zhiruo. She was completely soaked.

Zhang Wuji dropped the buckets and rushed in. "Miss Zhou," he hastily asked, "Are you all right?"

Zhou Zhiruo's head and face was wet; she looked really miserable. She was extremely stunned to suddenly see Zhang Wuji appear. She tried to move her hands, 'clink, clank, clink'. It turned out her hands and feet were shackled in iron chain by Jin Hua Popo. Zhang Wuji rushed to the lower deck cabin to fetch the Yitian Sword and cut away the shackles.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "You ... how come you are here?"

Before Zhang Wuji could reply, the hull suddenly shook violently. Zhou Zhiruo's legs were still weak and she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom. Zhang Wuji busily reached out to help her up. By the flame light from outside the window Zhang Wuji saw on her pale face two streaks of blush; embellished by little drops of water, she looked so beautiful and elegant,

just like narcissus in the morning dew.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and said, "Let us go to the lower deck cabin."

Two people barely went out the door when they felt the ship was spinning. Turned out the enemy's cannon just now had not only hit the rudder and smashed it, but killed the helmsman and threw him down the sea as well.

The captain was anxious, he personally loaded the cannon, with the hope of sinking the enemy ship. He kept pouring gunpowder down the gun barrel and packed it solid with an iron rod. Turning around the cannon's mouth, he lighted the fuse. 'Bang!' Suddenly the air around them turned red as the explosion shook the sky, pieces of steel and iron flew everywhere. The cannon exploded and killed the captain and the sailors standing nearby; their flesh and blood scattered everywhere. It was because the captain wanted to utilize the full power of the cannon that he put several times the amount of gunpowder than necessary, so that the cannon exploded instead.

Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo had just stepped onto the deck when they saw the ship was on fire; they withdrew immediately. Looking around Zhang Wuji saw a small boat tied on the port side of the ship. "Miss Zhou," he called out, "Jump to that boat ..."

By this time Xiao Zhao, carrying Yin Li, and Xie Xun, carrying Zhao Min, emerged from the lower deck cabin. Turned out the explosion had made a crack on the hull of the ship and the seawater welled up quickly. Zhang Wuji led Xie Xun and Xiao Zhao to the boat. He cut the rope with his sword and 'splash!' the boat fell onto the sea below.

Zhang Wuji jumped out and lightly landed on the boat. He took the pair of oars and started rowing with all his might. By this time, the fire was blazing wild, painting the surface of the sea to a bright red. Zhang Wuji thought he must take the boat as far away as possible from this circle of light. If the Persian Three Emissaries did not see the small boat, they would think that everybody perished in the sea and will no longer pursue them. Xie Xun followed his example by taking out a plank and rowing furiously.

The small boat sailed swiftly on the waves; in a short moment they were outside the circle of light. They heard a series of explosions as the gunpowder on the ship was detonated. The Persian ship did not dare to come close; they stopped to observe afar from quite a distance.

Some of Zhao Min's warriors possessed good water skills; they dove into the sea and swam toward the enemy ship, crying for help. But the Persians shot them with arrows and they died in the sea.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun did not dare to slack off. If the Three Emissaries overtook them on land, they would still be able to fight to the death. But now they were in the middle of the boundless ocean; if the enemy ship fired their canon, even if they missed the small boat by several 'zhang's, the wave would surge and the small boat would capsize. Fortunately, these two's internal energy was very profound that they were not exhausted although they rowed for half a night.

Black clouds filled the sky towards dawn and all around them was gray drizzle of thick fog. Zhang Wuji happily said, "If this thick fog stays for half a day, then the enemy will not be able to find us in any way." But towards the afternoon, suddenly a strong wind came followed by a heavy rain.

The small boat was blown southward by the wind. It was the depth of wintertime. Everybody's clothes were soaked. Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun had profound internal energy, so they were all right. But blown by the north wind, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao could not restrain their teeth from chattering. Unfortunately, there was nothing on that small boat; nobody could come up with any ideas. Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun had stopped rowing for a while; right now four people removed their eight shoes and used them to scoop the rainwater accumulated on the boat to the sea.

Xie Xun was very happy to finally meet Zhang Wuji; although the present situation of their plight was dangerous, he did not seem to care. He cursed the sky and shouted at the sea, and was busy talking and laughing in the rain. Xiao Zhao was also carefree; she happily accompanied Xie Xun chitchatting. Only Zhou Zhiruo was silent; occasionally her eyes would meet Zhang Wuji's, and she would immediately turn her head around to avoid his gaze.

"Wuji," Xie Xun said, "In the past, while your parents and I were riding on a boat together, we met a violent storm along the way; it was worse than today. Afterwards we were marooned on an iceberg and we had seals as our food. But that time the south wind was blowing, so we were floating to the North Pole's world of ice and snow. Today the north wind is blowing. Could it be that 'Lao Tian Ye' [God, or Heaven] think Xie Xun is not pleasing to the eyes, that He wants to send me to the South Pole's palace of old immortals for another twenty years? Ha ha ha ha ...!"

After laughing for a moment he said, "That time your parents were one man and one woman, a talented young man and a beautiful young woman; it was a match made in Heaven. Now you have four beautiful girls with you; what

can we do? Ha ha ha ha ...!”

Zhou Zhiruo blushed and lowered her head; while Xiao Zhao remained calm and said, “Xie Laoyezi [old master Xie], I am Gongziye’s [master] servant; of course I don’t count.”

Although Zhao Min’s injury was not light, she was conscious the whole time; “Xie Laoyezi,” she suddenly said, “If you keep talking nonsense, as soon as I am well, we’ll see if I don’t slap your ears really good.”

Xie Xun stuck out his tongue and said with a smile, “This girl is actually very mean.” Suddenly the smile disappeared from his face; he hesitated a moment before saying, “Hmm, last night you launched three suicidal moves. The first one was Kunlun Pai’s ‘yu sui kun gang’, the second one was Kongtong Pai’s ‘ren gui tong tu’, and the third one ... what was it? The old man is uncouth and unlearned, could not hear it.”

Zhao Min was secretly shocked. “No wonder Jin Mao Shi Wang’s name shook the world in the past; his conducts in Jianghu were earth-shattering,” she thought, “His eyes are blind, yet he was able to guess correctly the two stances I was using. He truly lives up to his reputation.”

“The third move was Wudang Pai’s ‘tian di tong shou’,” she said, “Apparently it was developed only recently, no wonder Laoyezi does not know.” She said that with a really respectful expression.

Xie Xun sighed, “You did your utmost to save Wuji; that was really good,” he said, “But why did you risk your own life? Why risked your life?”

Zhao Min started to say, “He ... he ...” but then she stopped, as if she was mulling over whether she should continue or not. Finally she could not refrain from sobbing; she said, “He

... Who told him to show such affection? ... Hugging ... Hugging Miss Yin. I don't want to live!" Finished speaking, her tears were already rolling down like rain.

Hearing her publicly revealing her deepest feelings unexpectedly, four people were startled; they did not remember Zhao Min was a Mongolian girl who loves when she wants to love, and who hates when she wants to hate. Certainly she was not wishy-washy; unlike the Central Earth's women who were strongly influenced by Confucianism's custom and regulations. Besides, they were all on a small boat in the middle of the ocean, the heavy rain drenched their heads, their small boat could capsize anytime and they would all perish. At the time when they hovered between life and death, it was even more unnecessary to be scrupulous.

Listening to Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel touched. "Miss Zhao is originally my archenemy," he thought, "This time my primary intention was to see Yifu when we were going out to the sea together. Who would have thought that she would have these deep feelings toward me?" Unable to restrain his emotions, he reached out to hold her hand, put his lips next to her ear and whispered softly, "No matter what, next time you can't do it again."

As Zhao Min blurted out her feelings, she had almost immediately had already regretted it; thinking that if a girl from an honorable family did not stop this kind of talk from coming out, how could he not look down on her? Suddenly hearing him admonish her lovingly, she was surprised and happy, bashful and loving at the same time. She felt an unspeakable sweetness in her heart and felt that last night's risking her life three times, and the suffering of drifting on the ocean today, everything, were not in vain.

The heavy rain started to subside and gradually stopped, but the fog was coming back and actually getting thicker and thicker. Suddenly a swishing noise was heard as a large fish, more than 30 catties, leaped up from the sea. Xie Xun's right hand stretched out and stabbed his five fingers into the fish's belly, taking the fish into the boat. Everybody cheered. Xiao Zhao took out her sword to cut open its belly and scrape the scales; and then cut it to pieces. They were all hungry, so although the raw fish was smelly, they forced themselves to eat a few slices. Xie Xun ate eagerly; he had lived on a desolated island for more than twenty years, and had survived on all kinds of food, how could he care about eating raw fish? Besides, the fish was fresh; after chewing for some times and being used to the fresh fish smell, the meat brought out its raw sweet flavor.

The waves gradually subsided. After eating, they all closed their eyes to get some rest. They had been fighting violently for the whole day and whole night the previous day, they were not only physically, but emotionally exhausted as well. Although Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were not engaged in battle physically, the excitement and frights they experienced were not small. The ocean gently rocked the small boat like a cradle; the six people on the boat fell asleep one after another.

They were sound asleep for almost six hours. As an old man, Xie Xun was the first one to wake up. He heard the sound of five young people breathing blended with the sound of the wave and the wind. Since Zhao Min and Yin Li were injured, their breathings were short and quick. Zhou Zhiruo's breathing was light and long. Zhang Wuji's inhales and exhales sounded like they were broken yet continuous, without any distinct separation. Xie Xun was secretly astonished, "This child internal energy is very profound," he thought, "I won't be able to achieve this level in all my life."

Xiao Zhao's breathing was sometimes fast, sometimes slow, a sign of a very special school's internal energy cultivation method. Xie Xun frowned as he remembered something, "This is strange," he mused, "Could it be that this child is ..."

Suddenly his thought was interrupted by Yin Li's loud shout, "Zhang Wuji, you little kid, why don't you come with me to Ling She Island?"

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were awakened by her shout. She said again, "I live alone on the Island, and quite lonely ... why are you not willing to come and accompany me? I miss you so much, you ... you are in the afterworld, do you know that?"

Zhang Wuji put his hand on her forehead and felt it was burning hot; he knew her severe wound had caused her a fever, making her sprouting nonsense. Although his medical skill was exquisite, there was nothing on the small boat, not even a blade of grass, so he was helpless. He tore away a piece of his clothes and soaked it in the water, then pressed it on her forehead.

Yin Li continued to ramble; suddenly she shouted, "Father, you ... don't kill mother, don't kill mother! I was the one who killed 'Er Niang' [second madame or second mother], you'd better kill me; it had nothing to do with mother ... Mother is dead, mother is dead! I killed my mother! Boo hoo hoo ..." She cried miserably.

"Zhu'Er, Zhu'Er, wake up," Zhang Wuji said in a gentle voice, "Your father is not here, you don't have to be afraid."

"Father is not good, I am not afraid of him!" Yin Li indignantly said, "Why did he marry 'Er Niang', 'San Niang'?"

[third madame or third mother]? Is not one wife enough for one man? Father, you have two hearts and three minds; delight in the new, discard the old. You've married someone yet marry another, hurting my mother really bad, hurting me really bad! You are not my Father, you are a heartless man, a greatly wicked man!"

Zhang Wuji was shocked and alarmed; his face turned blue and his lips white. Turned out he had just had a good dream; he dreamt that he married Zhao Min, and also married Zhou Zhiruo. Yin Li's face had changed, she was beautiful; he also married her and Xiao Zhao. Whatever idea he did not dare to think during the day had manifested itself in a dream when he was sleeping. He felt that these four girls were all good, and he could not bear to part with any of them. Hence when he comforted Yin Li, his mind was still vaguely remembering the sweetness that the dream brings.

This time listening to Yin Li scolding her father, he recalled how in the past she had told him that because she could not accept her mother being cheated, she killed her father's beloved concubine, so that his uncle, Yin Yewang wanted to kill his own daughter. This tragic incident had affected Yin Yewang greatly that to comfort his own feeling he took several more wives and concubines.

Zhang Wuji looked at Zhao Min, and could not help but look at Zhou Zhiruo as well, remembering his dream, he was deeply ashamed. He heard Yin Li mumbling in her sleep, but suddenly she implored urgently, "Wuji, please come with me, I am asking you. You've bitten the back of my hand really bad, but I don't hate you the least bit. I will take care of you as long as I live, to be close to you, to regard you as my master. Don't hate me because my face is ugly; if you want it, I'd rather lose my martial art, I'll discard the poison from the thousand spiders, so my face will come back to

when you first saw me ...”

She spoke these last few sentences with a very tender and gentle voice, totally different from the strong-willed and short-tempered, eccentric cousin Zhang Wuji had always known; that gentle and tender feeling also grew in his heart. He heard her continue, “Wuji, I went everywhere looking for you, I went to the end of the earth without hearing anything about you, and then in the western region I heard you have died, falling off a cliff; made me want to stop living. In the western region I met a guy named Zeng Ahniu; his martial art skill was very high, he was also very good to me; he wanted to take me as his wife.”

Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao knew that Zhang Wuji often used the name Zeng Ahniu, they all turned their eyes to him. Zhang Wuji blushed profusely; he felt very awkward to be under these three girls attentive gaze. He really wished he could just jump into the sea and did not come back up until Yin Li regained her consciousness.

He heard Yin Li mumbled and said, “That Ahniu Gege [big brother Ahniu] said to me, ‘Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy.’ He said, ‘From now on, I will cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don’t care if I’ll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings.’ Wuji, that Ahniu Gege’s character is a lot better than yours; his martial art skill is also stronger than that Emei Pai’s Miejue Shitai. But my heart belongs to you, this heartless and short-lived little rascal, hence I cannot come with him. You have died young then I will be your widow for the rest of my life. Wuji, tell me, isn’t Ah Li good to you? You ignored me in the past, don’t

you regret it now?"

At first Zhang Wuji was very embarrassed when she repeated what he said to her, but the more he listened to her, the more his heart was touched. He could not control his tears from flowing down his cheeks.

By now the thick fog had already been dissipated, the crescent moon illuminated the boat. Yin Li was leaning on her side, so that her graceful figure was clearly seen. She softly said, "Wuji, in the afterworld, aren't you lonely? Don't you miss me? I am going with Popo to the northern sea's Bing Huo Island to find your Yifu, and then I am going to the Wudang Mountain to offer sacrifice on your parents' graves. Afterwards I am going to the snowy peak in the western region where you died and I'll jump down to accompany you. But I must wait for Popo's a hundred years [meaning: a lifetime, till she died]; I cannot accompany you yet, leaving her to suffer in this world alone. Popo treated me very well, if she did not save me, I would have been killed by Father early on. For your Yifu's sake I have betrayed Popo; she must hate me very much, but I still have to be good to her. Wuji, don't you think so?"

She talked as if she was discussing something face to face with Zhang Wuji. In her heart, Zhang Wuji had become a ghost from another world. The way she spoke soft and gentle words to the dead, plus the moonlight shining on the ocean, a quiet night, lone boat were all making those who were listening feel a sudden chill creep in their hearts.

Yin Li kept rambling to the east and to the west, which did not make any sense whatsoever; sometimes she called out in alarm, sometimes shouted in anger, each word was a manifestation of inexhaustible anxiety in her heart. She called out and shouted randomly like that for a while, finally

her voice softened, and slowly she fell into a deep sleep.

The other five people on the boat were silent as they were busy with their own thoughts. The only audible noise was the sound of the waves gently striking the hull of their little boat. Under the gentle wind and the bright moon, they felt that the life's miseries from tens of thousands days ago still exist today, and will be forever.

In between thoughts, they suddenly heard a very faint gentle singing float above the water, 'In the end, this body will be difficult to escape from that day. Out of a hundred years span of life, those who reach seventy are already sparse. Years of misery pass like torrential flood of the river.' [Translator's note: I am not a poet, and this passage is very difficult to translate. I welcome any correction.] It was Yin Li who softly sang the song in her sleep.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold; he remembered inside the secret passage of the Brightness Peak, when their exit was completely stopped by Cheng Kun that they were unable to get out, Xiao Zhao had also sung this tune. Almost without thinking he turned to look at Xiao Zhao. Under the moonlight he saw that Xiao Zhao was looking at him with a blank expression her face.

End of Chapter 29.

Chapter 30 - East and West Will Always Be Divided like Enemies

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Recalling that year on the Brightness Peak, by the Bluish Green Cold Pool, with lavender gown like a flower and sword brighter than snow, Taj-kis had upset countless heroes and warriors' hearts.

After singing that song, Yin Li continued singing another tune. This time the song was unspeakably weird, the melody was totally different from songs of the Central Earth. If one listened closely, they would be able to discern the words, which were also similar to the song Xiao Zhao used to sing, 'Coming like the running water, departing like the wind; wonder where it came from, and where it will end!'

She sang these two songs over and over again, while her voice getting softer and softer, until finally her voice was drowned by the noise of the wind and the waves. Everybody pondered how life and death was not eternal; one came into this world lightly, just like the flowing water of the river, without knowing where it came from. It does not matter if you are a hero or a warrior, death is inevitable in the end, coming out of this world also lightly, just like the blowing wind, without knowing where it would go. Zhang Wuji felt that Zhao Min's delicate fingers in his hand were as cold as ice, and they slightly trembled.

Xie Xun suddenly said, "This is a Persian song; Mrs. Han must have taught her. One evening twenty years ago, I heard this song at the Brightness Peak. Ay, I can't believe Mrs. Han could be that heartless to hurt this child with a cruel hand."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min asked, "How did Mrs. Han know about a Persian song? Was it a Ming Cult's song?"

Xie Xun replied, "Ming Cult's origin is from Persia, so this Persian song is somewhat related to the Ming Cult; but it is not a Ming Cult song. This song was written by the most famous Persian poet Omar Khayyam more than two hundred years ago; it was said that every Persian could sing this song. When I heard Mrs. Han sing this song, I was touched; thereupon I asked her the story behind this song, and she

told me everything:

There was a great Persian philosopher by the name of Imam Mowaffaq Nishapuri; among his disciples, there were three outstanding students: Omar Khayyam, who was a master in literature studies, Nizam-ul-Mulk, who was an expert in political studies, and Hassan-i-Sabah, who excelled in martial arts. These three were good friends and bound themselves in an oath, to face fortune and adversity together, and not to forget each other in riches and honor.

Later on because of his accomplishment, Nizam-al-Mulk became Vizier to the Seljukid Empire. His two old friends came to seek shelter. Nizam entreated the Shah, and Hassan was granted an official position. Omar was not willing to be a government official; he only asked for annual provision so that he could research and study astronomy, almanac and mathematics, also to drink wine and write poems in peace. Nizam generously granted each of his friends' requests.

Unexpectedly, Hassan was ambitious; he was unwilling to be someone else's subordinate for long and thus staged a rebellion. His attempt was foiled and he fled to a mountain. Later on he became the chief of a sect whose prestige shook the world. This sect specifically took murder as their service, and was called the Hashhashin Sect. During the Crusades, whenever someone in the western region mentioned the name of The Old Man of the Mountain, Hassan, no hearts would be exempt from shaking in fear. Many of the western region's rulers lost their lives under the innumerable assassins under The Old Man of the Mountain.

Mrs. Han told me that in the far west [i.e. Europe] there is one great nation called England. This country's King Edward has offended The Old Man of the Mountain, so he dispatched a band of assassins. The King was wounded by a poisoned

blade. Luckily, the Queen sacrificed herself to save her husband by sucking the poison from his wound. As a result, the King survived.

In spite of the kindness he received in the former days, Hassan dispatched his men to assassinate the Vizier, Nizam-al-Mulk. At the point of his death, the Vizier uttered Omar Khayyam's verse; these two lines 'Coming like the running water, departing like the wind; wonder where it came from, and where it will end.'

Mrs. Han also told me that afterwards, the martial art from The Old Man of the Mountain's Sect was practiced by the people of the Persian Ming Cult. The Persian Three Emissaries' martial art was odd in a strange way; I suppose it stemmed from The Old Man of the Mountain's martial art."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min said, "This Mrs. Han's character is similar to that of The Old Man of the Mountain; you treated her with utmost kindness, yet she plotted to harm you."

Xie Xun sighed, "It is common for people to repay kindness with evil; what's so strange about that?" he said.

Zhao Min lowered her head and was silent for half a day before saying, "Mrs. Han was the chief of the Ming Cult's Four Kings, but her martial art skill is not necessarily superior to Laoye Zi. Last night, why didn't she use the deathly stances of 'qian zhu wan du shou' [hand of thousand spiders ten thousands poisons] when she fought with the Persian Three Emissaries?"

"Qian zhu wan du shou?" Xie Xun asked, "Mrs. Han does not know that skill. She is a woman of an outstanding beauty, and she cherishes her appearance more than her life; how could she be willing to practice this kind of skill?"

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo were startled; they thought Jin Hua Popo was ugly. Looking at her present appearance, even if she was thirty, forty years younger, it would be very difficult for them to say that she possessed an outstanding beauty. Her nose was crooked and her lips thick; her face was oval-shaped, her ears as big as a pair of fans. Certainly these features would not change over time.

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Laoye Zi, I’ll say Jin Hua Popo’s beauty is nowhere near ‘outstanding.’”

“What?” Xie Xun said, “Zi Shan Long Wang’s [purple-robed dragon king] beauty is similar to deities’. Twenty some years ago she was the Wulin World’s Number One Beauty. Granted that she is advanced in years now, but her gracefulness in the past should still be there ... Ay, too bad I cannot see her anymore.”

Listening to him speaking seriously, Zhao Min had a vague feeling that something was wrong; this ugly, hunched back and sickly woman was the Wulin World’s Number One Beauty? Nobody would buy that. “Laoye Zi,” she asked, “Your name shook the Jianghu, your martial art skill is high, so nobody would doubt you. Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king] founded a cult. He managed to stand equally with the six major sects, and even fought valiantly against them for over twenty years. Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] comes and goes like a ghost. That day at the Wan An Temple he threatened to destroy my face; hereafter if I think about it, I am still shivering in fear. On the other hand Jin Hua Popo to have a position above the other three is rather unsuitable although her martial art skill is also high and quite resourceful. I wonder why?”

Xie Xun replied, “That was because Yin Er Ge [Second (older

Brother Yin], Wei Si Di [Fourth (younger) Brother Wei) and I, three people were willing to yield to her.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked. Suddenly she chuckled and said, “Because she was the most beautiful woman in the world, three great heroes were willing to submit under her skirt?” She was a Mongolian woman, who did not confine herself to senior-junior propriety; whatever came into her mind, she would unscrupulously blurt it out as a joke toward Xie Xun.

Surprisingly, Xie Xun was not angered. He sighed and said, “Do you think only three people who willingly submitted under her skirt? If I say there were a hundred people inside and outside the Cult who hoped to attain Taj-kis’ favor, I am afraid that number is still too few.”

“Taj-kis?” Zhao Min wondered, “Is that Mrs. Han? How come her name is so strange?”

“She is a Persian,” Xie Xun said, “That is a Persian name.”

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo were stunned; “She is a Persian?” they asked almost simultaneously.

“Can’t you all see?” Xie Xun was surprised, “She was born of a mixed marriage between a Chinese and a Persian. Her hair and eyes are black, but her nose is high and her eyes deep; her skin is as white as snow; greatly different from the women of the Central Plains. It is so easy to distinguish.”

“No, no!” Zhao Min said, “Her nose is low, her eyes are like a pair of slits on her face; completely different from your description. Zhang Gongzi, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “Could it be that she is like Ku Toutuo, deliberately destroying her own face?”

“Who is Ku Toutuo?” Xie Xun asked.

“He is the Ming Cult’s Guang Ming You Shi [right emissary of the brightness], Fan Yao,” Zhang Wuji replied. Thereupon he briefly told him how Fan Yao had destroyed his face and entered the Ruyang Palace as a spy.

Xie Xun sighed, “This act by Fan Xiong [brother Fan], done in pain and suffering, was a great merit to our Cult; not everybody is capable of doing that. Ay, part of it was also because of Mrs. Han’s affair.”

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min said, “Please don’t keep us in suspense. Why don’t you tell us everything from beginning to the end?”

“Hmm,” Xie Xun raised his head up and was lost in thought for half a day before he slowly said, “Twenty some years ago, the Ming Cult was quite prosperous under Yang Jiaozhu’s leadership. One particular day three Persian foreigners suddenly appeared at the Brightness Peak, to deliver the personal letter of the Persian Central Cult’s Jiaozhu addressed to Yang Jiaozhu. The letter said that the Persian Central Cult had a Jing Shan Shizhe [lit. clean and virtuous emissary], who was Chinese. He had lived in Persia for a long time; joined the Ming Cult, and rendered quite a few meritorious services. He married a Persian woman and had a daughter. This Jing Shan Shizhe passed away a year ago. On his deathbed he remembered his native land and wished his daughter be sent to China. The Central Cult’s Jiaozhu honored his wish and thus dispatched some people to escort his daughter to the Brightness Peak; hoping that the Central Earth’s Ming Cult would look after her.

Yang Jiaozhu readily agreed and invited the daughter to

come in. As that young woman entered the main hall, immediately it was as if the hall was filled with a glorious light; nothing could describe her glaring beauty. As she knelt down to pay her respects toward Yang Jiaozhu, there wasn't any one who was not shaken among everybody in that hall, including the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries, the three Protector Kings, the Five Wanderers and the Five-Element Flags.

The three Persian escorts only stayed at the Brightness Peak overnight; they took their leave the very next day. Since then, this glamorous Persian girl, Taj-kis lived at the Brightness Peak."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min said with a laugh, "At that time you were also mesmerized by this glamorous Persian woman, were you not? Come on, don't be shy; admit it honestly."

"No!" Xie Xun shook his head, "At that time I was a newlywed; I loved my wife dearly, and she was pregnant. How could I think about another woman?"

"Oy," Zhai Min muttered, silently scolding herself for making an indiscreet remark. She knew that Xie Xun's wife and son were killed by Cheng Kun. This time she inadvertently brought it up, she knew she would unavoidably bring grief to Xie Xun's heart; hastily she said, "That's right, that's right! No wonder Mrs. Han said that when she married Yin Ye Xian Sheng [Mr. Silver Leaf], everybody on the Brightness Peak opposed her, except Yang Jiaozhu and you, who treated her very well. I bet Jiaozhu's wife was not only beautiful, but also an expert in martial arts, so she won over her husband's heart."

"Yang Jiaozhu was generous, brave and chivalrous," Xie Xun said, "Taj-kis' age was appropriate to be his daughter.

Besides, the Persian Central Cult has entrusted her to him, so Yang Jiaozhu always treated her with utmost respect; definitely he did not have any inappropriate thoughts against her. Mrs. Jiaozhu was my Shifu's shimei [martial (younger) sister], she was my Shigu [martial aunt]. Yang Jiaozhu loved his wife very much."

Cheng Kun had killed his entire family; Xie Xun bore a long and deep hatred toward him but when mentioning Cheng Kun's name, Xie Xun said it lightly, as if he was mentioning other people's name.

Zhao Min asked, "I heard when he was young, Ku Toutuo Fan Yao was a very handsome man. Did he fall in love with Taj-kis?"

Xie Xun nodded; "It was love at first sight," he said, "Later on it became a kind of infatuation written-in-his-heart and engraved-on-his-bone. In fact, I am afraid I seldom find a man whose heart was not moved by Taj-kis' beauty. But the Ming Cult' religious law is strict; everybody maintained self-control and propriety. In the end, only bachelors dared to show their admiration toward Taj-kis. Who would have thought that Taj-kis's heart was as cold as ice; she was also a no-nonsense, unpretentious kind of person. Whoever revealed even a slight cordiality toward her would receive her harsh reprove; to the point of humiliating him so that he would fall from his honored position. My Shigu, Madame Jiaozhu, wanted to be the matchmaker between her and Fan Yao. Taj-kis flatly declined. Later on, she went as far as swore publicly, with a sword horizontally across her body, saying that she would never get married, and that she would rather die if anybody forced her. Because of this, everybody's heart also turned cold towards her.

One day about half a year later, somebody from Ling She

Island came to the Brightness Peak. He said his surname was Han, given name Qianye [lit. thousand leaves], a son of Yang Jiaozhu's enemy of the former days. He came to avenge his father. Admittedly, nobody thought this youngster surnamed Han's appearance was astonishing. Seeing his surprising boldness in coming to the Brightness Peak to challenge Yang Jiaozhu, everybody burst out in laughter. But Yang Jiaozhu's expression was serious; he received him as an honored guest and prepared a banquet to welcome him.

After the feast, Yang Jiaozhu explained to the brethrens how in the past due to a misunderstanding he had seriously injured this lad's father using the 'da jiu tian shou' [great nine heavenly hands] that his father fell on his knees and was unable to stand back up. At that time the father said that he was going to avenge this enmity; only realizing his martial art skill would not advance anymore, he promised that he would send his son or his daughter.

Yang Jiaozhu said that whomever he would send, whether a son or a daughter, Yang Jiaozhu would yield to him or her for three stances. That man replied that he would not expect Yang Jiaozhu to yield, but he would ask that if they were to have a martial art duel, to have his son or daughter choose the method on how they would fight. At that time Yang Jiaozhu gave his consent.

A dozen or so years had passed; Yang Jiaozhu had already set this matter aside from his mind. Who would have thought that the man surnamed Han did indeed send his son to seek revenge. Everybody thought that it would be well if he did not come; but once he came, nothing good would happen to him ['shan zhe bu lai, lai zhe bu shan']. This man dared to come alone to the Brightness Peak, he must have had an astonishing skill. But Yang Jiaozhu's martial art skill was very high; it could be said that nobody in this present

age could be compared to him. Other than Wudang Pai's Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit. real/true man, a term of respect to address a Taoist priest], nobody would be able to take his one stance or half a form. How old could this man surnamed Han be? Yang Jiaozhu did not have anything to be worried about even if he was three times or five times his age. We were anxious only over how they were going to have their duel.

Chapter 30 – Part 3 On the next day, in front of everybody Han Qianye first explained the agreement of the past, cornering Yang Jiaozhu so that he could not deny his promise, and then he presented his request. To everybody's surprise, he wanted to fight against Yang Jiaozhu inside the 'bi shui han tan' [bluish green water cold pool] on the Brightness Peak to decide victory or defeat.

As he said that, everybody was shocked. The water of 'bi shui han tan' was really cold, penetrating the bones. Even in the heat of the summer nobody dared to enter in, much less in the middle of the winter?

Although Yang Jiaozhu's martial art skill was high, his water skill was only so-so. If he went into the 'bi shui han tan', , he would be frozen to death, or drown to his death inside the water without even contending in martial arts. At that moment, all warriors and heroes in the Sheng Huo Ting [holy fire hall] opened their mouths to denounce the young man."

"That was a very difficult dilemma," Zhang Wuji said, "Once a word left a real man's mouth, four horses would not be able to chase it. Yang Jiaozhu had made a promise to that man surnamed Han that he would let his son or daughter to pick the way they would fight. That Han Qianye Lao Qianbei [senior, older generation] picked water battle; reasonably speaking, Yang Jiaozhu could not refuse."

Zhao Min reached out to the back of his hand and pinched it lightly; she laughed and said, "That's right! Once a word left a real man's mouth, four horses would not be able to chase it. What kind of man was the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu? How could he swallow back his words, break his own promise to the world? Once he gave his consent regarding other people's matters, then he should fulfill his promise."

She was saying that to Zhang Wuji, reminding him about the oath of honor between them; but of course Xie Xun did not know that. "That's exactly so," he said, "That day Han Qianye clearly said, 'I am going up the Brightness Peak alone, I am not hoping to go down this mountain alive. The heroes and warriors can simply kill me; nobody in the Jianghu will find out. I am only a nameless lowly character. What difference does it make if there is one less of me? If you want to kill me, go ahead.' When everybody heard what he said, they could not say anything anymore."

Yang Jiaozhu was silent for half a day before he finally said, 'Han Xiongdi [Brother Han], I have made an agreement with your honorable father. A hero must be frank; I already lost this duel. I am going to comply with whatever you have in mind.'

Han Qianye flipped his wrist and produced a brilliantly gleaming dagger; he pointed the dagger to his own chest and said, 'This dagger is Xianfu's [late/departed father] legacy; I am only asking Yang Jiaozhu to kowtow three times to this dagger.'

As the warriors heard him, there wasn't anybody who was not angered; how could a Ming Cult's Cult Leader take this humiliation? But Yang Jiaozhu has admitted defeat; according to the Jianghu custom, he had no choice but

comply with the opponent's wishes.

The situation was clear; Han Qianye came staking everything he got, as soon as Yang Jiaozhu kowtowed three times, he would immediately thrust the dagger into his own chest to avoid being killed by the warriors of the Ming Cult.

In that instant, the main hall was awfully quiet. The Brightness Left and Right Emissaries, Xiao Yao Er Xian [Xiao and Yao, two immortals], White-browed Eagle King Yin Er Ge [second (older) brother], Peng Yingyu Heshang [Buddhist monk], and the others are all excellent strategists, but facing this difficult problem, they were at their wits' end. It was obvious to them that Han Qianye intended to humiliate Yang Jiaozhu the same way his father was forced to fall on his knees; and then he would kill himself.

In this critical moment, Taj-kis suddenly stepped forward and said to Yang Jiaozhu, 'Father, he is a good and filial son; but don't you also have a good and filial daughter? This Master Han is seeking revenge on behalf of his father, so it is only appropriate if your daughter fight him on your behalf. The older generation dealt with the older generation, the younger generation deals with the younger generation; no confusion in generational gap here.'

Everybody was surprised, 'Why did she call Yang Jiaozhu 'tie-tie' [dad, father]?' But straight away they understood, 'She is pretending to be his daughter to help him out of this distress.' They also thought, 'Looking at her pretty and delicate features, does she know martial arts? Even if she does, her skill is certainly not too high, so to have a water battle in the 'bi shui han tan' is even more out of question.'

Yang Jiaozhu has not replied, Han Qianye has already laughed coldly and said, 'It's certainly all right if Miss wants

to fight on behalf of your father; but if Miss loses, I am still going to insist that Yang Jiaozhu kowtow three times toward my Xianfu's dagger.' He has noticed that Taj-kis was a pretty and delicate girl, of course he did not consider her a threat to him.

Taj-kis replied, 'What if Sire loses?'

Han Qianye said, 'You want to kill me or chop me, it's entirely up to you.'

'Good!' Taj-kis replied, 'Let us go to the 'bi shui han tan' then.' As she said that, she had already preceded him walking toward the pool.

Yang Jiaozhu hastily waved his hand, 'No,' he said, 'This matter does not have anything to do with you.'

'Father,' Taj-kis replied, 'Don't you worry.' And she respectfully knelt down to him. It was as if with this kneeling down, she acknowledged Yang Jiaozhu as her Yifu. Yang Jiaozhu saw that she had high confidence; other than that, he did not have any other idea. Hence, he was obliged to listen to her proposition.

Immediately everybody went to the 'bi shui han tan' on the northern side of the mountain. By that time the northern wind was blowing intensely, as we arrived by the pool side, the cold air attacked us furiously. Those whose internal energy was somewhat lower had already felt discomfort. The water in the pool had turned into ice for quite a while, below the surface the water looked deep blue, we could not see the bottom.

Yang Jiaozhu did not want Taj-kis to risk her life for him, he boldly said, 'Dear Daughter, I accept your good intention,

but let me fulfill Han Xiong's wish.' As he said that, he took off his outer garment, and with a single dagger in his hand he was ready to jump in; this time he had made up his mind not to back off.

Taj-kis smiled and said, 'Father, your daughter grew up by the sea; since I was little my water skill has been very good.' Immediately she unsheathed her sword and leaped to the middle of the pool. Standing on the ice she turned her sword to make a circle about two feet in diameter. With her left foot she treaded on the ice, 'crack!' the round ice broke and she jumped into the water."

At that moment a gust of sea breeze from the north brushed their clothing. Xie Xun continued his narration, "Each time I recalled the scene by the 'bi shui han tan' that day, it always seems like yesterday to me. Taj-kis was wearing a lavender gown. Standing on the ice that day, she looked like the 'ling bo xian zi' [Immortal/Deity/Goddess Ling Bo]. Silently and instantly she disappeared into the water below; the crowd of warriors was amazed.

As Han Qianye watched the way she entered the water, the haughty expression on his face disappeared. He followed, jumping into the pool with the dagger in his hand.

The pool was dark green; nobody could see the battle raging underneath the surface from above the water, but the water was bubbling continuously.

After a while the bubbling gradually ceased. But before long the water started to bubble again. The Ming Cult warriors were extremely anxious. Those two had been in the water for a long time, how could they survive underwater for that long?

A moment later a wisp of dark red blood appeared on the green deep water. Everybody was even more anxious, not knowing if Taj-kis was injured. Suddenly 'splash!' Han Qianye jumped out from the water, gasping for breath, panting heavily.

Seeing him jumping out first, everybody was shocked; they surged forward and asked, 'Where is Taj-kis? What happened to her?' But then they saw that his hands were empty, his dagger was actually stuck on his right chest, while there was a long scar on each of his cheeks.

While everybody was still in shock, Taj-kis flew up from the water like a flying fish, with her sword in front of her body as a shield. She made a flip in the air and lightly landed on the ice. The warriors broke into loud cheers. Yang Jiaozhu went forward to grab her hand; he was speechless from extreme delight. Nobody would guess that this cute and tender girl possessed such magnificent water skill.

Taj-kis looked at Han Qianye and said, 'Father, this man's water skill is not bad. Taking into account that he was a filial son seeking revenge for his father, could his rudeness toward Jiaozhu be forgiven?' Naturally, Yang Jiaozhu granted her request; he ordered Shen Yi [Divine Doctor] Hu Qingniu to treat his injury.

That very evening there was a huge banquet on the Brightness Peak; everybody agreed that Taj-kis has rendered a great service to the Ming Cult. If not for her stepping out to take the matter over, Yang Jiaozhu's reputation would go down the drain. Immediately a position in the Cult was arranged. Madame Yang bestowed to her the title 'Zi Shan Long Wang', and given her the same authority as the Eagle King, Lion King and Bat King. We, the other three kings, were most willing to let her hold the chief position among the four

kings; since her great merit that day easily surpassed the other three kings' merits of the past. Afterwards the three 'hu jiao fa wang' and she, four brothers and sister, agreed on how to address each other; hence she called me 'Xie San Ge' ever since.

[Translator's note: 'hu jiao fa wang' ('hu' - protect, 'jiao' - Cult, 'fa' - law, 'wang' - king) has been translated as 'Protector King' throughout this novel. I believe the more accurate translation should be 'Protector of the Cult, Law Enforcement King', or 'Judge'. (The same 'fa wang' was translated 'imperial priest', as in Jin Lun Fa Wang, in Shen Diao Xia Lu - RoCH) I am going to keep using the term 'Protector King', interchangeably with 'fa wang' for the remainder of this novel; I want the readers to be informed that the term carries a broader sense than simply 'Protector King.']

The battle of 'bi shui han tan' has brought another repercussion beyond anybody's anticipation. Han Qianye was defeated in the battle, but somehow he won Taj-kis' heart. I don't know whether it was because she visited him on his sick bed everyday, or love grew out of pity, or passion out of regret; but when Han Qianye recovered, suddenly Taj-kis reported to Jiaozhu that she wanted to marry this man.

As we heard this news, some were grieving because their hopes were shattered, some deeply resented it; because this Han Qianye had forced our Jiaozhu to be under an extremely difficult situation. How could our own 'hu jiao fa wang' marry this man? Some of the more temperamental brethrens spoke insultingly to her face.

Taj-kis was adamant. Holding a sword in her hand, she stood at the hall entrance and loudly said, 'From this day forward, Han Qianye is my husband. Whoever insults Han-lang [a

term of endearment for 'husband'], will have to face Zi Shan Long Wang's sword!' Seeing this turn of event, everybody could only disperse bitterly.

On the day she wedded Han Qianye, most of our brethrens did not come to drink the celebratory wine. Only Yang Jiaozhu and I, who were appreciative for what she did, strived to help her and mediate for her, so that she could have a safe marriage, not lacking anything.

When Han Qianye wanted to enter the Ming Cult, the opposition from the brethrens was too strong; it was also inconvenient for Yang Jiaozhu to disregard the public opinion.

Not too long afterwards, Yang Jiaozhu husband and wife suddenly disappeared together. The Brightness Peak was in panic. Everybody went everywhere to track them down. One evening Guangming You Shi Fan Yao unexpectedly saw Mrs. Han Taj-kis come out of the secret passage."

Zhang Wuji's heart was moved. "She came out of the secret passage?" he asked.

"That's right," Xie Xun replied, "The Ming Cult's law is very strict; other than Jiaozhu, nobody is allowed to enter the secret passage. Fan Yao was shocked and angered; immediately he asked and reproached her. Mrs. Han said, 'I have committed a grave offense to our Cult; you want to kill me or chop me, it's entirely at your convenience.'

That very evening we had a general assembly. Mrs. Han kept repeating those words. When asked for what reason she entered the secret passage, she said she was not willing to tell lies, but she was also unwilling to tell the truth. When asked where Yang Jiaozhu had gone; she said she did not

know. As for the matter of her entering the secret passage, she said she alone had done it, she alone was responsible; there was no need to say too much.

According to our law, she either had to kill herself or cut off one of her limbs; but first of all, Fan Yao had not forgotten his feelings of the past, he did his utmost to cover up for her, secondly, I also pleaded on her behalf. Finally, the general assembly agreed to punish her by confining her for ten years, so that she could consider her crime. Who would have thought that Mrs. Han said, 'Yang Jiaozhu is not here, nobody can punish me.'"

"Yifu," Zhang Wuji asked, "Why did Mrs. Han enter the secret passage?"

"That's a long story," Xie Xun replied, "In the Ming Cult, only I alone know the reason. At that time everybody suspected it had something to do with the missing Yang Jiaozhu, husband and wife; but I am convinced it wasn't related with that matter in any way.

In the Holy Fire Hall of the Brightness Peak that day, there was a strong argument among the warriors, and it resulted in Mrs. Han leaving the Cult, saying that from that day on, she would have nothing to do with the Ming Cult of the Central Earth. She was the very first person to ever leave the Ming Cult. That very day Han Qianye and she left the peak and disappeared without any trace.

Thereafter the Cult brethrens went around everywhere to find Jiaozhu without any result. A few years later the internal strife over the Jiaozhu position got worse. Bai Mei Yin Er Ge also left the peak and founded the Heavenly Eagle Cult ['tian ying jiao']. I persuaded and pleaded with him, but he would not listen. Because of that, he and I became enemies.

More than twenty years ago, by the Wangpan Mountain the Heavenly Eagle Cult showed off the Saber to flaunt their power and prestige. Jin Mao Shi Wang hurriedly appeared on that gathering. First, to snatch the Tulong Saber away; second, to vent my anger over the dispute of the former days. I intentionally wanted to give Yin Er Ge a hard time; to let him know that after leaving the Ming Cult, he might not be able to accomplish anything great. Ay! When I think about it now, I was rather carried away by my feelings and went too far!”

He heaved a long sigh, as if he was unleashing the inexhaustibly bitter feelings of the past and mourning over the countless disturbances in the Jianghu; during which the others were silent for half a day.

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min said, “Afterwards, the names of Jin Hua Yin Ye [golden flower silver leaf] shook the Jianghu. Why was it that nobody from the Ming Cult recognized their true identities? That Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf] must be Han Qianye; how did he get killed by poison?”

“I am not clear on that matter myself,” Xie Xun said, “When they, husband and wife, roamed the Jianghu, they always avoid Ming Cult people.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “Jin Hua Popo has always avoided the Ming Cult. When the Six Major Sects besieged the Ming Cult, she did not go up to lend a hand even though she was in the vicinity of the Peak.”

Zhao Min pondered over it and said, “But Zi Shan Long Wang was the beauty of her era; how did she become that ugly? Her face did not show any sign of damage.”

Xie Xun said, "I guess she is using some clever trick to change her appearance. In all her life, Mrs. Han has always been a peculiar person, but actually she endures an unspeakable suffering in her heart. She has always avoided the Persian Central Cult's people's pursue, but who would have thought she is still unable to escape in the end."

"Why is the Persian Central Cult looking for her?" Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min asked simultaneously.

"This is Mrs. Han's biggest secret," Xie Xun replied, "Actually, I should not say it, but I am hoping that you would return to the Ling She Island to save her; so I'll have to tell you this."

"Return to the Ling She Island?" Zhao Min wondered, "Do you think we can overcome those Persian Three Emissaries?"

Xie Xun did not answer directly, but he told this story instead: "For several hundred years, the Ming Cult of the Central Earth has always had a man as our Jiaozhu; but the Persian Central Cult's Jiaozhu has always been a woman, not only that, but the woman must be a virgin. The Holy Scripture of the Central Cult clearly stipulated that the virgin maiden is necessary to maintain the Ming Cult's sacred purity. Right after each Jiaozhu takes office, three maidens, called the 'sheng nu' [holy maiden] are appointed from among the Cult's high-level officials. After these three holy maidens take an oath, they are sent out to do good deeds and render meritorious service to the Ming Cult. As the current Jiaozhu pass away, the elders of the Cult convene to evaluate the three holy maiden's merit; the holy maiden who renders the greatest merits then designated to be the new Jiaozhu. But if there is any holy maiden who loses her chastity, she will be punished by getting burned alive; even if she runs away to the ends of the earth, the

Cult will dispatch people to pursue her, in order to maintain the purity of the sacred teaching ...”

As he spoke to this point, Zhao Min interjected, “Is that Mrs. Han one of the three holy maidens of the Central Cult?”

“Correct!” Xie Xun nodded his head, “I was already aware of it even before Fan Yao found out she came out of the secret passage. Mrs. Han considered me as a friend; therefore, she told me everything. During the battle with Han Qianye inside the ‘bi shui han tan’, they had some physical contacts, her feeling started to grow. Later on, they reassured each other by his sick bed, and she knew that she was committing a great sin. She was aware that there will come a day when the Central Cult will dispatch someone to find her. She was hoping to render a great service to the Central Cult as retribution of her crime. Thereupon she entered the secret passage stealthily to find the ‘qian kun dai nuo yi’ manual. The Central Cult had lost this manual for a long time; the only copy left belonged to the Central Earth Ming Cult. As a matter of fact, the real reason the Central Cult sent her to the Brightness Peak was to find this manual.”

“Ah,” Zhang Wuji exclaimed. He vaguely felt something was wrong, but after thinking for a while he still could not figure it out.

In the meantime, Xie Xun continued, “Mrs. Han had entered the secret passage several times, but could not find the manual. As I learned about it I gave her a serious warning that this matter was a grave offense to the Cult’s law, which would not be easily forgiven ...”

“Ah, I know!” Zhao Min interrupted again, “Mrs. Han left the Cult because she wanted to enter the secret passage. Since

she is not a member of the Central Earth Ming Cult, then the restriction did not apply to her.”

“Miss Zhao is so smart,” Xie Xun said, “But the Brightness Peak is our headquarters, how could we allow outsiders to come and go as they wish? At that time I’ve also guessed her intention, so after Mrs. Han left the mountain, I personally guarded the secret passage entrance. Mrs. Han did indeed come up the mountain three times, each time she met me; finally, she gave up.”

Xie Xun thought deeply for a moment, then he asked, “Those Persian Three Emissaries’ clothing, in what way they are different from what they have in the Central Earth Ming Cult?”

Zhang Wuji replied, “They all wear white robes with blazing flame embroidered on the corners ... Hmm, there was a black strip on their white robes; that is the only small difference.”

“That’s it!” Xie Xun slapped the edge of the boat and exclaimed, “The Central Cult Jiaozhu has passed away. The people of the west use black as their mourning clothes. White robes with black lining, those are their mourning garments. They are going to elect a new Jiaozhu, that’s why they came tens of thousands ‘li’s to the faraway Central Earth to find Mrs. Han’s whereabouts.”

Zhang Wuji said, “Since Mrs. Han came from Persia, she must be familiar with the Persian Three Emissaries’ weird martial arts. How come in less than a stance she was captured by them?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “You idiot; Mrs. Han is in disguise, of course she could not reveal that she knew the Persian Emissary’s martial art. From what I understood, supposing Xie Laoye Zi had listened to their order and killed

her, Mrs. Han would certainly find a way to escape.”

Xie Xun shook his head, “She is not willing to reveal her own identity, that part is correct. But if you think that she was capable of escaping after her acupoint was sealed by the Persian Three Emissaries, that might not necessarily be true. In anyway, she would rather be killed by my blade than suffer the pain of being burned alive.”

“I always think the Central Earth Ming Cult is a malicious cult,” Zhao Min said, “Who would have thought that the Persian Ming Cult is even more evil. Why would they want a virgin to be their Jiaozhu? Why would they burn the holy maiden who lost her chastity?”

“Miss talked nonsense,” Xie Xun rebuked her, “Each Cult and Sect will have their own customs and ceremonial regulations, handed down from generation to generation. Buddhist monks and nuns cannot marry, cannot eat meat, isn’t that custom and ceremonial regulation? What is malicious or evil?”

Suddenly they heard a ‘clack, clack, clack’ noise, Yin Li’s teeth chattered from cold. Zhang Wuji quickly touched her forehead and felt his hand was burning hot; a sign that she was suffering from a severe fever. “Yifu,” he said, “Your child also would like to return to the Ling She Island. Miss Yin’s condition is very serious, I must find some herbs to treat her. We must strive to save Mrs. Han, we must also save Miss Yin.”

“That’s right,” Xie Xun replied, “This Miss Yin loves you this much; how can we not save her? Miss Zhou, Miss Zhao, what do you think?”

“Miss Yin’s injury is serious,” Zhao Min said, “Mine is not a

problem. Other than returning to the Ling She Island, what else can we do?"

Zhao Zhiruo unenthusiastically said, "Laoye Zi says we should return then we must return."

Zhang Wuji said, "We have to wait for the fog to clear up and then we can look at the stars to find our bearing. Yifu, that Liuyun Shi was somersaulting in the air, but he was able to hurt me with his Sheng Huo Ling. How did he do that?"

Immediately the two of them discussed the Persian Three Emissaries' martial arts. Zhao Min also possessed a vast knowledge of martial arts, so occasionally she was able to offer some opinion. But after deliberating for half a day, they still could not figure out the essence of the coordinated movements of the three people.

The fog on the ocean lasted until dawn. Zhang Wuji said, "We came from the north toward the southeast; hence we need to row toward the northwest."

Zhang Wuji, Xie Xun, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao took turn rowing the boat. It was not easy to handle that small boat braving the big waves against the strong northerly wind. Fortunately, Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun possessed profound internal energy; Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were not weak either. They considered rowing the boat as martial art training.

For several days, the lone boat headed northwest slowly but surely. Xie Xun had been frowning all this time, as he was thinking deeply about the Persian Three Emissaries' strange martial art. Other than asking Zhang Wuji a few questions, he did not say anything else.

Toward the evening of the sixth day, suddenly Xie Xun carefully interviewed Zhou Zhiruo about the martial art of Emei Pai, which Zhou Zhiruo answered matter-of-factly. Two people exchanged questions and answers until very late at night.

Xie Xun's expression showed some disappointment as he said, "Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, three Sects' martial art was somewhat related to the 'Jiu Yang Zhen Jing' [Nine Yang Manual]; similar to what Wuji has learned, all based on the 'yang gang' [positive and hard/firm]. If only Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit. real/true person, a respectable term to address a Taoist Priest] was here, then his extensive martial art skill encompassing 'yang gang' and 'yin rou' [negative and soft/flexible] could join hands with Wuji; so yin and yang complement each other, then we can defeat the Persian Three Emissaries. But distant water cannot extinguish a nearby fire; if Mrs. Han has already fallen into the hands of the Persian Three Emissaries, what use is my good idea?"

"Laoye Zi," Zhou Zhiruo suddenly asked, "I heard a hundred years ago in the Wulin world there exist some experts who were proficient in the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing [Nine Yin Manual]; is that true?"

On Mount Wudang, Zhang Wuji had heard his Da Shifu [great master] mentioned the name Nine Yin Manual; so he knew that the founder of the Emei Pai, Guo Xiang Nuxia's [heroine] father, Guo Jing, and the 'Shen Diao Daxia' [Divine Eagle Great Hero] Yang Guo, both had mastered the martial arts from the Nine Yin Manual. But the skill contained in the Manual was very difficult; so that although Guo Xiang was Guo Jing's own daughter, she still had not learned it. Listening to Zhou Zhiruo's question he thought, "Could it be that the Emei Pai's founder has handed down parts of the

skill contained in the Nine Yin Manual?”

Xie Xun replied, “People of old did say such thing, but nobody knows the fact. Based on what I heard from the seniors, if we had someone who masters this martial art join hands with Wuji, then they would be able to defeat the Persian Three Emissaries.”

“Hmm,” Zhou Zhiruo mumbled and no longer asked any questions.

“Miss Zhou,” Zhao Min asked, “Do any of your Emei Pai people know this martial art?”

Zhou Zhiruo replied, “If Emei Pai knew this divine skill, Xian Shi [late/departed master] would not lose her life at the Wan An Temple.”

Miejue Shitai passed away because of Zhao Min, so Zhao Zhiruo hated her to the bone. Although they were on the same boat through the wind and the rain, she had not talked to her even one sentence. This time Zhao Min asked her directly, she contradicted her immediately. Zhou Zhiruo was gentle by nature; her remark to Zhao Min was already the most rude she had talked to anybody in her entire life. Zhao Min was not angry; she simply smiled.

During this entire conversation, Zhang Wuji did not stop rowing the boat. Suddenly he looked at the distant and called out, “Look! Look! There is fire over there!”

Everybody followed his gaze and indeed they saw flashing light of fire on the horizon toward their northwest. Although Xie Xun was not able to see, he was as excited as everybody else; he took the wooden oar and helped to row the boat with all his strength.

That blazing fire looked near, but actually it was dozens of 'li's away on the surface of the ocean; both men had to row for most of the day before they got close to it. Zhang Wuji saw the fire was actually on a mountainous island, which was precisely the Ling She Island. "We have arrived!" he said.

"Aiyo!" suddenly Xie Xun exclaimed, "Why is the Ling She Island on fire? Did they burn Mrs. Han?"

'Thud' suddenly Xiao Zhao fell down on the boat.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he leaped to help her up, but her eyes were tightly closed, looked like she passed out. He busily massaged her acupoint to wake her up. "Xiao Zhao," he called out, "What happened to you?"

With tears on her eyes Xiao Zhao said, "I heard somebody is being burned alive, I ... I ... I'm very scared."

"That was just Xie Laoye's guess," Zhang Wuji consoled her, "It might not be true. Besides, even if Mrs. Han has fallen into their hands, if we rush, we might still be able to catch up and save her."

Xiao Zhao grabbed his hand and earnestly said, "Gongzi, please, you have to save Mrs. Han's life."

"All of us will do our best," Zhang Wuji replied. He went back to the stern, picked up the oar, and exerting his strength, he rowed even faster.

Xiao Zhao also picked up an oar, and although her hands were trembling, she also furiously paddled the boat.

“Zhang Gongzi,” suddenly Zhao Min said, “There are two things that I don’t understand; I’ve been giving it a thought for a long time, but still cannot figure it out. I wonder if you could enlighten me.”

Hearing her suddenly being polite to him, Zhang Wuji felt strange. “What is it?” he asked.

Zhao Min said, “That day outside the Green Willow Manor, I dispatched people to attack your grandfather, Yang Xiao, and the others; but this Miss Xiao Zhao had actually defended against the troops. I know that under a capable general there are no weak soldiers, but still, under the Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu there is actually a little servant girl with this kind of ability, I found it really strange ... ”

“What Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu?” Xie Xun interrupted.

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min laughed, “Let me tell you now: the young master, your foster child, is the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. You are actually his subordinate.”

Xie Xun was half believing and half doubting; he was at a loss of words. Thereupon Zhao Min told him briefly how Zhang Wuji had taken over the Cult Leader position; but she did not know too much about the details. Xie Xun then asked Zhang Wuji directly, and he did not have any choice but telling him the truth, about his involvement when the Six Major Sects besieged the Brightness Peak, and how he found the ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’ manual inside the secret passage.

In his utmost delight Xie Xun stood up, then knelt down on the small boat’s deck; “Subordinate Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun pays his respect to Jiaozhu,” he said.

Zhang Wuji hastily also knelt down to return his respect. "Yifu," he said, "Please don't be overly courteous. Yang Jiaozhu had left an order for Yifu to take the interim Jiaozhu position. It is very hard for your child to bear this heavy responsibility. With the Heaven's blessing Yifu has returned, safe and sound; it is truly our Cult's good fortune. As soon as we reached the Central Earth, I am going to ask Yifu to take over the Jiaozhu position."

Xie Xun sadly said, "Your Yifu has returned, but his eyes are blind. So you cannot actually say 'safe and sound'. How can a blind man take the leadership of the Ming Cult? Miss Zhao, didn't you say you have two things you do not understand?"

"I want to ask Miss Xiao Zhao," Zhao Min said, "Who taught you the 'qi men ba gua' [strange/wonderful gate, eight trigrams] and 'yin yang wu xing' [yin and yang, five elements] techniques? You are very young, how did you know all those extraordinary skills?"

Xiao Zhao replied, "They are my family heritage. It is not worth Junzhu Niang-niang's [Princess] attention."

"Who is your honorable father?" Zhao Min asked further, "The daughter is this good, your father and mother must be world famous masters."

"My father has buried his name and lives in seclusion," Xiao Zhao replied, "Why did Junzhu bother to ask? Could it be that you are going to cut my fingers to force me to show you my martial art?" She was young, but surprisingly did not show the slightest degree of submission toward Zhao Min. By bringing up the finger cutting affair, it was obvious that she was trying to incite Zhou Zhiruo's anger; pulling her to her side to face a common enemy.

Zhao Min simply smiled; she turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Zhang Gongzi, that night we met at the small inn in Dadou for the second time, Ku Toutuo Fan Yao came to take his leave from me. When he saw Miss Xiao Zhao, he said two sentences; what were those?"

Zhang Wuji had already forgotten this matter; now that she brought it up, he had to think for a moment before answering, "Ku Dashi [Reverend Ku] seemed to say that Xiao Zhao's appearance looks very much like someone he knew."

"Correct!" Zhao Min said, "Can you guess to whom did Ku Dashi think Miss Xiao Zhao look like?"

"How can I guess?" Zhang Wuji said.

Throughout this discussion, the small boat was approaching the Ling She Island. They that saw a row of ships were moored on the west of the Island; there was a large red blazing fire painted on each one of their main sails, there was also a black ribbon hanging from each sail. Zhang Wuji wrinkled his eyebrows and said, "The Persian Central Cult dispatches their armada; the number of people coming in must be a lot."

Zhao Min said, "Let us take this boat to the back of the island and land on a secluded place. Don't let them see us yet."

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji nodded his head.

He was only rowing for three, four 'zhang's when suddenly from one of the ships came a bugle sound, 'whoo, whoo ...' followed by 'bang, bang' two explosions, as two cannonballs were fired away. One fell to the left of the small boat, the other to its right side, creating two water columns. The small

boat was shaken and nearly turned over.

Someone called out from the ship, "Quickly row the boat over here; if you don't obey, we are going to fire again."

Zhang Wuji silently groaned, knowing that with these two salvos the enemy deliberately demonstrated their ability to shoot accurately; if they could hit two sides of the boat, then with the distance so close, they would easily hit the boat. Once the boat capsized, none of the six people onboard would survive. He had no choice but slowly row the boat toward the ship while the three cannons from the big ship slowly turned, following them around.

When the small boat reached the ship, a rope ladder was let down. Zhang Wuji said, "Let us go up and try to seize the ship."

Xie Xun groped around for the ladder and he was the first to go up. Without saying anything Zhou Zhiruo stooped down to pick Yin Li up, and then climbed to the ship, followed Xiao Zhao. Carrying Zhao Min in his arm, Zhang Wuji was the last to go aboard the ship.

They saw the people on the ship were all blonde haired with blue eyes, their statures tall, they were Persian foreigners; but Liuyun Shi and the other two were actually not among them. One of them, who spoke Chinese, asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Zhao Min replied, "We are shipwrecked; and are looking for help."

That Persian was half believing and half doubting; he turned his head around and spoke several sentences in Persian toward someone sitting on a chair on the deck, who seemed

to be their leader. That leader mumbled some instructions. Suddenly Xiao Zhao jumped and sent out a palm strike toward that leader. The leader was startled; he dodged sideways, grabbed the chair, and smashed it toward Xiao Zhao.

Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise; not anticipating Xiao Zhao to make her move this soon. He moved three feet sideways and stretched out his fingers to strike the leader's acupoint. The several dozen Persian sailors aboard were immediately thrown into confusion; they unsheathed their weapons and surrounded them. Although these people knew martial art, their skills were far below those of the Cloud and Wind emissaries.

Supporting Yin Li with his right hand, Zhang Wuji's left hand struck to the east and slapped to the west. Xie Xun unsheathed his Tulong Saber; Zhou Zhiruo brandished her sword; together with Xiao Zhao whose movements were quick, in a short period of time they struck down dozens of Persians. More than ten people fell down on the deck, either died or seriously injured by the blades; about seven, eight people fell down to the sea below, while the rest of them were immobilized because their acupoints were sealed.

Instantly the sea was full with people shouting and bugle sounding, as the other Persian ships moved to surround them, with the people on board ready to attack. Zhang Wuji picked up the leader and jumped to the ship's side. "Don't you dare come over, or I'll hack this man to his death," he shouted loud and clear.

The people on the other ships shouted and yelled. Zhang Wuji did not understand what they were saying, but seeing that nobody jumped to their ship, he believed the man he captured must be someone in a high position, so that the

enemy hesitated and did not dare to attack rashly. Zhang Wuji jumped back down to the deck.

He barely laid that leader down when he suddenly heard a swishing noise from behind, as a weapon was coming down on his back. Quickly he evaded sideways and kicked back; only to feel that his foot had struck a Sheng Huo Ling, while from the left another Sheng Huo Ling swept horizontally. Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, resenting the fact that the Wind, Cloud, and Moon Emissaries have arrived this quickly. "Everybody, retreat back to the cabin," he shouted, while lifting up the leader in his hands to parry the Sheng Huo Ling.

Huiyue Shi hastily pulled her attack back, but because of this abrupt movement, her lower body was exposed; Zhang Wuji swept with his leg and almost hit her calf. Liuyun Shi and Miaofeng Shi attacked together from the sides, forcing Zhang Wuji to withdraw his kick.

Toward the ninth stance, the Sheng Huo Ling in Miaofeng Shi's left hand slamming down diagonally in a very weird move; looked like he was aiming Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. Zhang Wuji lowered the Persian leader's body. Although Miaofeng Shi's stance was very strange, Zhang Wuji's reaction was extremely ingenious. 'Slap!' the Sheng Huo Ling squarely hit that Persian on his left cheek.

The Three Emissaries cried out in alarm simultaneously; their countenance changed and they leaped back at the same time. After talking in Persian among themselves, suddenly they bowed toward the Persian in Zhang Wuji's hand, with a very respectful expression; and then they retreated.

Suddenly the bugle sounded again as one big ship slowly

came near. On the bow of this ship were twelve embroidered golden banners, while underneath the banners twelve chairs were set covered in tiger skins. One of the chairs was empty, while the other eleven were occupied. That big ship stopped some distance away and dropped its anchor.

Zhao Min noticed that the empty chair was the sixth one; a thought came to her mind. "The man we captured is dressed similar to those eleven people on that ship; looks like among their twelve leaders, he ranks number six."

"Twelve big leaders?" Xie Xun asked, "Hmm, the Central Cult's twelve 'bao shu wang' [lit. kings of treasured/precious tree] have come to the Central Earth. This is no small matter."

"What are the twelve 'bao shu wang'?" Zhao Min asked.

"Under the Jiaozhu of the Persian Central Cult," replied Xie Xun, "are the twelve grandmasters of the Scripture; they are called the Twelve Precious Tree Kings. Their position is similar to the Four Protector Kings of the Central Earth's Ming Cult. These twelve kings are: the first Dasheng [great holiness], the second 'zhi hui' [wisdom or knowledge], the third Changsheng' [eternal victory], the fourth Zhanghuo' [palm of fire], the fifth Qinxiu [diligent cultivation], the sixth Pingdeng [equality], the seventh Xinxin' [faith], the eighth Zhen'e [suppressing evil], the ninth Zhengzhi [integrity], the tenth Gongde' [virtue], the eleventh Qixin [single mindedness], the twelfth Juming [entire brightness]. However, these twelve Precious Tree Kings are only experts in Scriptures and doctrines, great teachers of religious law; I heard they are not experts in martial art. This man is the sixth; so he must be the Pingdeng Bao Shu Wang."

Zhang Wuji sat down by the main mast, laying down the

Pingdeng Wang on his knees. This man held a high position within the Persian Central Cult; hence, Zhang Wuji was thinking of using him a hostage to escape later on, therefore, he must take a good care of him. Looking down, Zhang Wuji saw that man's left cheek was swollen very badly; fortunately it was not life-threatening. Thinking about the fierceness of Miaofeng Shi's strike, he felt strange; hastily he exerted his strength and felt some reaction from this man's internal energy.

Meanwhile Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were cleaning up the deck; they moved the corpses to the rear cabin and laid down those who were still alive neatly in rows on the deck.

They saw that they were surrounded by more than ten Persian ships, with each ship's cannon aimed at their ship, while the deck next to the fender was full of Persian people; their blades flickered under the bright torchlights. The ships were jam-packed with these people, it was difficult even to estimate how many people were there. Zhang Wuji was secretly anxious; without even considering the fact that the cannons on each ship were capable of bombarding their ship, if these thousands of people attacked together, he would be hard-pressed to defend himself even if he had three heads and six arms. He might be able to escape relying on his own martial art skill; but how about his companions? Moreover, Yin Li and Zhao Min were injured, making their situation more dangerous.

He heard a Persian speak in Chinese with a loud voice, "Jin Mao Shi Wang, listen! Our Twelve Precious Tree Kings of the Central Cult are here. You have committed a crime against the Central Cult, the Precious Tree Kings are being lenient and willing to pardon you. Quickly release the Cult member on your ship, we will allow you to sail away safely."

Xie Xun laughed. "The Old Xie is not a three-year old child; do you think we don't know that your cannons will fire on us as soon as we released the hostages?" he said.

That Persian was indignant. "If you don't release our people, do you think we cannot shoot you?"

Xie Xun hesitated for a moment before answering, "I have three conditions; if you agree, we will then respectfully send these Cult people ashore."

"What condition?" that man asked.

"First," Xie Xun replied, "From now on, the Central Cult and the Central Earth Ming Cult are to respect each other, no more interfering with each other's affairs."

"Hmm, and the second?" that man said.

"Release Taj-kis," Xie Xun said, "Send her over to our boat. Pardon her for losing her chastity, and do not look for her again, ever."

"Not on your life," that man angrily said, "Taj-kis has violated a major law of the Central Cult; she must be burned alive as a punishment. What does that have to do with your Central Earth Ming Cult, anyway? What is the third condition?"

"You have not agreed to the second one, why talk about the third one?" Xie Xun said.

"All right!" that man replied, "Let's just say we agree to the second condition; then there is no problem in hearing the third one, isn't there?"

"The third condition?" Xie Xun said, "That's the easiest one.

Send a small boat to follow us. After we sail for fifty 'li's, and we are sure that you are not pursuing us, then we'll release the hostages to the small boat. You are free to pick them up."

That man angrily shouted, "Hu shou jiu dao! Hu shou jiu dao!"

Xie Xun and the others were puzzled, not understanding what he said. Zhao Min laughed and said, "This man learned how to speak Chinese, but he learned it sloppily. He must have thought one degree higher than 'nonsense' must be 'absurd'." [Translator's note: 'hu shuo ba dao' (????) means 'rubbish, nonsense', where the single character ? - 'ba' means 'eight'. The man increased the number eight to number nine, ? - 'jiu'.]

Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji thought they could not blame his logic; they could not help bursting into laughter even though they were currently under a dire circumstance.

As that man increased the 'degree of rubbishness' and Xie Xun and the others were laughing, the Precious Three King who was sitting at the end of the row, called Juming Bao Shu Wang, was angry. Letting out a loud whistle, he jumped toward the enemy's ship. The eleventh king, Qixin Bao Shu Wang, followed behind him.

Zhang Wuji stepped forward, his left palm struck toward Qixin Bao Shu Wang's chest. To his surprise, Qixin Wang did not parry, but stretching out his left hand to grab the top of Zhang Wuji's head. Zhang Wuji thought that surely his palm would reach the enemy's body first; who would have thought that from the side Ju Ming Wang's both palms came charging in, blocking his palm, while at the same time Qixin Wang's fingers almost touched his skull. Zhang Wuji evaded

by moving one step forward. He realized now that these two people's collaboration was as tight as one person with four arms and four legs.

The three people had exchanged seven, eight stances in a flash. Zhang Wuji was inwardly worried; the collaborations of these two were somewhat inferior compared to the Wind and Cloud, three emissaries, but their martial art was very strange nonetheless. The essence of their martial art was clearly similar to the 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi', but as their attack arrived, it carried an unpredictable variation within, making it very difficult for Zhang Wuji to fight with confidence. Speaking about swiftness and fierceness, however, their stances were actually not as good as the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi by a long shot. These two men were fighting as they were mad; occasionally they would launch what seemed to be a stance from the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, but before striking the target, they would suddenly act as if they were losing their minds and kicked and hit randomly, but surprisingly their attack was very difficult to block. Their collaboration was very tight, it wasn't any different from the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries.

Zhang Wuji resisted with a lot of effort and only managed to fight them evenly; it was not until twenty, thirty stances later that he slowly started to gain an upper hand. It was at this moment that the Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, howled in one voice and jumped to their ship, toward the Pingdeng Wang, with the intention of snatching him back to redeem their guilt of striking him earlier.

Xie Xun heaved the Ping Deng Wang and brandished him around, making a large circle around him. This time, how could the Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, dare to act rashly? They hastened to the left and dodged to the right, while trying to find a hole to launch their attack.

Suddenly Juming Wang grunted and tumbled down. Zhang Wuji reached down trying to grab him, but Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi's pair of tablets came to block, while Miaofeng Shi scooped Juming Wang to bring him back to their own ship.

Qixin Wang and Cloud and Moon Emissaries were forced to face Zhang Wuji together; their coordination was not as when they were fighting with their own respective partners. After several more stances, they knew it was hard to score a victory. Three people successively let out a whistle and retreated to their ship.

After calming himself down, Zhang Wuji said, "These people definitely knew the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; but somehow their techniques are different, making it difficult for me to deal with."

"Our Cult's Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi originated from Persia," Xie Xun said, "But after they passed it on to us several hundred years ago, they lost their own copy. So what they preserved, according to Taj-kis, was only some shallow and superficial knowledge. For that reason, they sent Taj-kis to the Brightness Peak to get the manual back."

"Their martial art foundation really is superficial, so their knowledge is indeed only skin deep," Zhang Wuji said, "But the way they use it was truly ingenious. Obviously, they knew something significant that was the key to their skill, which I have not penetrated through. Hmm, in the seventh level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, there are some passages I have not mastered yet; could it be the key?" While saying that, he sat down on the deck with his head between his hands, thinking hard. Xie Xun and the others did not dare to make any noise, for fear they would disturb his train of thought.

“Aiyo,” suddenly Xiao Zhao called out in alarm. Zhang Wuji looked up only to see Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, was taking someone to the presence of the eleven Precious Tree Kings. That person was a hunchback, with a walking stick in her hand; she was none other than Jin Hua Popo.

Zhihui Bao Shu Wang who was sitting on the second chair shouted her some questions. Jin Hua Popo leaned her head sideways and shouted back, “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

Zhihui Wang sneered; he stood up and reached out with his left hand, pulling the entire white hair from Jin Hua Popo’s head, exposing a clump of silky hair as black as crow. Jin Hua Popo turned her head sideways, trying to hide her face. But Zhihui Wang’s right hand reached out suddenly to peel a layer of skin from her face.

Zhang Wuji and the others could see clearly that what Zhihui Wang peeled was a human skin mask. Instantly Jin Hua Popo turned into a very beautiful woman, with creamy white skin, almond shaped eyes, and cheeks like peach. Her countenance was glowing; her beauty was truly indescribable.

As Taj-kis’ true appearance was exposed, she might as well throw away the walking stick, and she stood there smiling bitterly. Zhihui Wang asked her some questions again, and she replied in Persian. As those two people exchanged words, the countenances of the eleven Precious Tree Kings were getting more and more serious.

“Miss Xiao Zhao,” suddenly Zhao Min asked, “What are they talking about?”

With tears in her eyes Xiao Zhao said, “You are so smart, you knew everything; why didn’t you prevent Xie Laoye Zi from talking?”

Zhao Min was puzzled, “Prevent him from talking what?” she asked.

Xiao Zhao replied, “Initially, they did not know who Jin Hua Popo was. Later on, they found out that she is the Zi Shan Long Wang; but they had never guessed that Zi Shan Long Wang is the Holy Maiden Taj-kis. Popo had made a great effort in concealing her identity from them. Xie Laoye Zi’s second condition was for them to release Sheng Nu Taj-kis; although his intention was good, he inadvertently revealed her secret to Zhihui Bao Shu Wang. Xie Laoyezi’s eyes cannot see, of course he did not know that Jin Hua Popo’s appearance was radically changed that nobody would recognize her. Miss Zhao, you can see everything clearly, could it be that you haven’t thought about it?”

In reality, when listening to Xie Xun’s story on the little boat, Zhao Min had early on guessed correctly that Jin Hua Popo was the Persian Ming Cult’s Holy Maiden Taj-kis, but she had never guessed that in the eyes of the Persian leaders, her true identity was by no means uncovered. She was about to open her mouth to retort back, but noticing that Xiao Zhao was speaking miserably, she vaguely guessed that Xiao Zhao must have had some unusual relationship with Jin Hua Popo. She did not have the heart to speak harshly and only said, “Xiao Zhao Meizi [(younger) sister, term of endearment], I certainly have not thought about it. If I had an ill-intention to harm Jin Hua Popo, let me die a horrible death.”

Xie Xun was even more remorseful; he did not say anything. But he had made a decision in his heart that even if he had

to lose his life, he would save Taj-kis from danger.

Sobbing, Xiao Zhao said, "They blame Jin Hua Popo, saying that she got married and committed apostasy against the Cult, they ... they are going to burn her to death."

"Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "Please don't worry, as soon as there is an opportunity, I am going to go over and save Jin Hua Popo." He was accustomed to call her 'Popo', but if he looked at Zi Shan Long Wang right now, even though she was middle-aged, but her gracefulness and beauty was not inferior to Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo, and the others; she even looked like Xiao Zhao's elder sister.

"No, no," Xiao Zhao said, "You cannot fight Eleven Bao Shu Wang, plus the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries; don't deliver your life in vain. Right now they are discussing how they are going to take the Pingdeng Wang back."

"Humph!" Zhao Min hatefully said, "Even if they take Pingdeng Wang back, his face has already imprinted with these lines of characters; he will look so ugly."

"What imprinted characters?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"That yellow bearded emissary's Sheng Huo Ling struck his left cheek ..." Zhao Min said, "Ah, Xiao Zhao!" suddenly she remembered something. "Xiao Zhao Meizi," she asked, "Do you know Persian characters?"

"I do," Xiao Zhao replied.

"Come here and look," Zhao Min said, "What is written on Pingdeng Wang's face?"

Xiao Zhao came near Pingdeng Wang and leaned over his

head; she saw his left cheek was swollen badly and three lines of Persian characters were imprinted on it. Turned out each one of the Sheng Huo Ling was engraved with characters. Miaofeng Shi had accidentally struck Pingdeng Wang, and the characters on the Sheng Huo Ling were transferred to his flesh. Only, the part where Sheng Huo Ling met the flesh was no more than two 'cun's wide and three 'cun's long [1 cun is approximately 1 inch (2.5 cm)], so the inscription was incomplete.

Xiao Zhao had followed Zhang Wuji into the secret passage of the Brightness Peak, and had memorized the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual; although Zhang Wuji had never forbidden her, she had never trained it, but she knew the theory of this martial art by heart. When Zhang Wuji encountered a difficulty during training of the seventh level and he was forced to skip several lines, Xiao Zhao had memorized those lines well. Presently, looking at the characters on Pingdeng Wang's face, she could not help from blurting out, "This is Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory!"

"Did you say Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"No, it's not," Xiao Zhao said, "At first, I thought it was it, but it's not. Translated into Chinese, those lines mean: 'reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear; three voids, seven solids, something exists out of nothing ...' something, 'the heaven square, the earth round ...' and the next line is unreadable."

Listening to these dozen or so characters, Zhang Wuji felt as if among the black clouds in the sky suddenly he saw a flash of lightning; but after the lightning passed, the sky was still dark. Nevertheless, this flash of lightning gave him hope, that in the midst of a five-'li' dense fog he could see a

glimpse of a way out. His mouth muttered, "Reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear ..." He tried hard to integrate these cryptic lines with the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory he already mastered. Several times did he think he see the connection, each time it appeared right but actually was wrong; in the end everything was still dark to him.

"Gongzi, watch out!" suddenly he heard Xiao Zhao calling out, "They are issuing an order: the Three Win and Cloud Emissaries are to attack you, Qinxiu Wang, Zhen'E Wang, and Gongde Wang, three kings are to take Pingdeng Wang back."

Xie Xun heaved the Pingdeng Wang and held him across his chest, while tossing the Tulong Dao to Zhang Wuji and said, "Just chop them up with this Saber."

Zhao Min also took the Yitian Sword and handed it over to Zhou Zhiruo. This time they were on the same boat sharing the same fate; fighting a common enemy together was more important than their differences.

Zhang Wuji took the Tulong Saber, and absentmindedly inserted the Saber to his waist, while his mouth was still mumbling, "Three voids, seven solids, something exists out of nothing ..."

"Idiot!" Zhao Min anxiously said, "This is not the time to ponder some martial art theory; quickly prepare yourself to face the enemy."

Before she finished speaking, Qinxiu, Zhen'E, and Gongde, three kings had already jumped over with their palms extended to attack Xie Xun. They were afraid to injure Pingdeng Wang, hence they did not dare to use weapons.

They were hoping that by attacking with their palms and fists, they might have a chance of snatching him back as soon as one man managed to get hold of Pingdeng Wang's body.

Zhou Zhiruo was standing by next to Xie Xun; each time the situation was critical, she would hack down her sword to Pingdeng Wang; forcing Qinxu Wang, Zhen'E Wang, and Gongde Wang, diverting their attack toward Zhou Zhiruo to prevent her sword from harming Pingdeng Wang.

On the other battlefield, Zhang Wuji was fighting the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries. These four people fought cautiously; each side had suffered some hard beating from their opponents, nobody dared to be careless. After fighting for several stances, Huiyue Shi's tablet came down to strike; according to basic martial art principle, this move should strike Zhang Wuji's left shoulder. Who would have thought that the Sheng Huo Ling changed its course halfway; it made a very strange turn and 'slap!' it hit the back of Zhang Wuji's neck.

Zhang Wuji felt a burst of severe pain, but it was as if his mind was as bright as snow. "Reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear, that's right, that's right!" he shouted excitedly. In this short period of time, he suddenly realized that the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries' martial art was based on the first level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; only the Sheng Huo Ling was inscribed with the marvelous, almost fantastic, variations on the usage of these stances. His mind was churning, and straightaway he understood the four lines of secret Xiao Zhao uttered earlier. Only he had not been able to penetrate the secret of 'the heaven square, the earth round' part. He thought he had to take a look at the inscription on the Sheng Huo Ling to thoroughly understand the essence of the

Persian martial art.

Suddenly he let out a clear whistle and his pair of hands, using the 'three voids, seven solids', reached out to grab two Sheng Huo Ling from Huiyue Shi's hands; while with 'something exists out of nothing' he took away the two Sheng Huo Ling from Liuyun Shi's hands. While the two of them were still in shock, Zhang Wuji had put the four Sheng Huo Ling into his bosom, and then separately grabbed them by the back of their necks and threw them back into their ship.

Amidst the shouting yelling of the Persians, Miaofeng Shi turned his body around trying to escape. By this time Zhang Wuji had understood clearly the basic principle of his opponents' martial art. His comprehension of the details was somewhat limited, but Miaofeng Shi's martial art had lost its mystery in his eyes. Once his right hand reached out, he grabbed Miaofeng Shi's left foot and pulled him back from midair. With one hand on the Sheng Huo Ling in Miaofeng Shi's hand, Zhang Wuji lifted up Miaofeng Shi's body and smashed him toward the top of Zhen'E Wang's head with the other hand.

The three kings were shocked; making hand signals to each other, they hurriedly leaped back to their ship. Zhang Wuji sealed Miaofeng Shi's acupoint and threw him down near his foot.

This victory of his came so quickly that in a blink of an eye from being under-handed he suddenly gained an upper hand. Zhao Min and the others were no less surprised and they all asked him how he did it.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "We might still be in trouble if not of mistakes arising out of chance that Pingdeng Wang

suffered this mishap. Xiao Zhao, translate the inscriptions on these six Sheng Huo Ling for me; quick, quick!”

They looked at the Sheng Huo Ling, and noticed that they were neither made of metal nor jade, but of very hard substance. The size of six of them varied, some were big, some were small, some were long and some were short. The surface seemed translucent, but also seemed opaque. There seemed to be a faint image of blazing fire dancing around inside the tablet, but actually it was a reflection of the ambient light on the tablets, on which color fluctuated. Each one of the Sheng Huo Ling was inscribed with a lot of Persian characters; to translate them would take a lot of time, not to mention Zhang Wuji would have to interpret their very profound meaning. But he realized that if he wanted them to survive this current situation, then he had to understand the essence of the Persian sect’s martial art.

“Miss Zhou,” he said toward Zhou Zhiruo, “Please place your Yitian Sword on Pingdeng Wang’s neck. Yifu, please place your Tulong Saber on Miaofeng Shi’s neck. We have to buy as much time as possible.” Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo nodded their compliance.

Xiao Zhao took the six Sheng Huo Ling, and picked the shortest one, an unremarkable blackish green tablet with the least characters inscribed on it, and she started translating it. Zhang Wuji listened attentively, but he did not understand even a single sentence. He pondered deeply but still could not make any sense of what he heard, and could not help but feeling very anxious.

“Xiao Zhao Meizi,” Zhao Min said, “Why don’t you read the Sheng Huoling that struck Pingdeng Wang.”

Her words had reminded Xiao Zhao; she busily checked the

inscriptions on the other tablets, and found it to be the second longest. She translated it immediately, and this time Zhang Wuji could actually understand 70, 80% of it. Once she was finished, she took the longest one and translated it. Zhang Wuji only heard several sentences when he happily said, "Xiao Zhao, these six Sheng Huo Ling, the longer ones contain the shallowest sentences. The one you just read was the rudimentary theory of their martial art."

Actually, the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling were cast by the Persian 'Shan Zhong Lao Ren' [the Old Man of the Mountain], in which he engraved the essence of his lifetime martial art achievement. These six Sheng Huo Ling entered the Central Earth at the same time as the Manichaeism, and they became the symbol of authority of the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. After a long time, nobody within the Ming Cult of the Central Earth understood Persian writing. Decades ago, the Sheng Huo Ling was stolen by the Beggar Clan. It went through many hands before finally acquired by a Persian merchant, and found its way to the Persian Ming Cult.

The Persian Central Cult diligently studied the writing for dozens of years, and as a result, the leaders of the Cult had enjoyed a tremendous advancement in their martial art skills. However, the martial art contained in these tablets were too broad and deep, so that even Dasheng Bao Shu Wang who was the first among the kings only managed to master 30, 40% of the entire skill set.

As for the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual, it was originally the Ming Cult's 'hu jiao shen gong' [divine skill to protect the cult]; but due to its extraordinary features, it was not a skill an average person would be able to master. The Persian Ming Cult stipulated that its Cult Leader must be a virgin maiden, and for hundreds of years, the position was held by

women with mediocre skill; therefore, the transfer of the manual to the successive generation was very limited, while the Central Earth Ming Cult still preserved the manual in its entirety. The Persian Ming Cult only mastered less than 10% of the original Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. By combining it with the 20, 30% of the Sheng Huo Ling's martial art, they developed a set of strange stances, forming a brand new branch of martial art skill.

Zhang Wuji sat cross-legged on the bow, while Xiao Zhao translated the inscriptions on the Sheng Huo Ling line by line. Actually, the martial art contained in these Sheng Huo Ling was very exquisite, but by mastering one set of skill well, it would be easier to learn ten thousand sets of skill; as all kinds of skills, although they use different and unique approach, are basically developed to reach a common goal. Zhang Wuji had already possessed a profound knowledge of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, as well as the principle of Wudang Pai's Taijiquan. Although the martial art of Sheng Huo Ling was strange, even greatly broad and profound, it was nothing more than another unorthodox sect's martial art, which had not attained the pinnacle of its perfection yet; after all, it was still far inferior to the aforementioned three martial art skills.

After Xiao Zhao finished translating the six Sheng Huo Ling, Zhang Wuji felt that he only remembered 70, 80% of it, and understood only 50, 60%; nevertheless, he was confident that he had understood thoroughly the martial art of the Precious Tree Kings and the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries.

Time slowly passed. Forgetting everything else, Zhang Wuji wholeheartedly pondered over the martial art he had just learned; but Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo, who observed the enemy's movement, were getting more and more anxious.

They saw Taj-kis' hands and feet were shackled, while the eleven Precious Tree Kings convened in private; then the eleven kings took off their long robes and changed into soft armors, while the people around them presented eleven strange-looking weapons. They saw the ships around them were full of Persians with their bows drawn and the arrows were aimed at them. They saw around a dozen Persians with hatchets in their hands plung into the water, waiting for their chiefs' command to sink their ship. Suddenly they heard Dasheng Bao Shu Wang, who was sitting among the kings shout; from all the ships the drums thundered and the bugles sounded.

Zhang Wuji was startled; he raised his head and saw the eleven Precious Tree Kings, each one wearing glittering metal armor and holding weapon in their hands, were jumping toward his ship. Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo held their Saber and Sword tight, placing them on Pingdeng Wang and Miaofeng Shi's necks. The eleven kings noticed this and as they jumped to the bow, they did not dare to press further. They formed a half moon formation and gazed intently, waiting for an opportunity to make their move.

In Zhou Zhiruo and Zhao Min's eyes, these eleven kings looked so mean and ferocious, plus they were tall in stature; they were rather afraid.

Zhihui Wang spoke in Chinese, "Thou better release my fellow Cult member quickly, we will spare thy lives. They people are like pigs or dogs in us eyes; why do thou need to place thy blades on they people's necks? If thou dare, go ahead and kill they people. There are thousands of people like them people in the Persian Holy Cult. What regret do we people have if thou kill one or two of they people?"

"Thou don't have to talk big to deceive we people," Zhao

Min said, "We people know that they two people are the Pingdeng Bao Shu Wang and Miaofeng Shi. They people's positions in thy Ming Cult are quite high. Thou said that they people are just like pigs or dogs in thy eyes then thou have made a mistake, a big heap mistake!"

That Zhihui Wang's Chinese was a 'textbook' Chinese, the terms they used for 'thou' and 'they people' were nondescript. Zhao Min had cleverly imitated his intonation and terminology. Although they were in a dangerous situation, Xie Xun and the others could not restrain from smiling.

Zhihui Wang frowned and said, "In our people's Holy Cult, there are three hundred sixty Bao Shu Wang, Pingdeng Wang holds the three hundred and fifty-ninth position. We people have one thousand two hundreds emissaries, this Miaofeng Shi's martial art is just so-so, he is totally useless. Thou quickly kill they people then!" "Very good, very good!" Zhao Min said, "Friends with saber and sword in your hand, quickly kill these useless people!"

"Accepting order!" Xie Xun said. Lifting up his Saber, he drew a deep breath and hacked down toward Pingdeng Wang's skull.

Everybody shouted in alarm; but the Tulong Saber swept gently and swiftly less than half an inch pass Pingdeng Wang's head, cutting a clump of his hair, which was blown by the sea breeze, vanishing into the air. Xie Xun moved his arm, slicing to the left and to the right, seemingly cutting Pingdeng Wang's arms; but in the last moment he flicked his wrist slightly and cut Pingdeng Wang's sleeves instead.

These three moves were executed fiercely, yet accurately. It was extremely difficult even for people with seeing eyes, let

alone for a blind man.

Narrowly missing death, Pingdeng Wang was so scared that he almost passed out several times. The other eleven Precious Tree kings and the Wind and Cloud three emissaries were dumbstruck; their mouths were wide open but their tongues were tied.

“Now thou have seen the Central Earth Ming Cult’s martial art,” Zhao Min said, “This Jin Mao Shi Wang ranks three thousand five hundred and ninth in the Central Earth Ming Cult. If thou want to rely on numbers to achieve victory, then the Central Earth Ming Cult will come to Persia to seek revenge in the future. We will wipe out thy central altar, and thou will certainly not able to resist. I suggest thou make peace with we people.”

Zhihui Wang knew Zhao Min was bluffing, but he did not know how to answer her. Suddenly Dasheng Bao Shu Wang spoke. Xiao Zhao called out, “Zhang Gongzi, they are going to sink our ship.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart turned cold; he realized his side did not possess excellent water skill. Once the ship sunk, they would certainly be captured by the enemy. His shadow flashed and he had arrived in front of Dasheng Wang.

“What are thou doing?” Zhihui Wang shouted. From both sides Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang, one was using a whip, the other a hammer, struck together.

By this time Zhang Wuji had already understood Persian Sect’s martial art; without even trying to evade, both of his hands reached out and grabbed the kings’ throats. ‘Clang!’ Gongde Wang’s iron whip and Zhanghuo Wang’s octagonal hammer struck each other. Sparks flew everywhere. Zhang

Wuji sealed both men's acupoints on their throats to immobilize them and dragged them away.

In this confusion Zhang Wuji kicked his feet left and right; two kicks made the blades in Qixin Wang and Zhen'E Wang's hands fly away, two more kicks made Qinxu Wang and Juming Wang fly into the water. Suddenly he saw a tall and skinny Precious Tree King pounce on him with a pair of daggers in his hand, stabbing Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhang Wuji's foot flew up and kicked his wrist. That man overlapped his hands and stabbed Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. This change was so quick that Zhang Wuji was forced to hurriedly leap back to evade.

Turned out this man was Changsheng [eternal victory] Wang, who possessed the highest martial art skill among the twelve kings of the Persian Central Cult. After sealing Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang's acupoints, Zhang Wuji quickly threw them into the cabin, and then turned his body around to fight Changsheng Wang's pair of daggers.

Although this man was numbered among the twelve kings, his martial art skill was strong, greatly different from the rest of the kings. Zhang Wuji attacked for three stances and defended for another three stances, he advanced three steps and retreated three steps. He inwardly praised, "A Persian with an excellent skill!"

After gaining an understanding of the martial art theory from the Sheng Huo Ling, Zhang Wuji did not have time to practice. Now that he met a powerful enemy, he had to think and fight Changsheng Wang at the same time. For the first dozen or so stances, he defended himself relying on his profound internal energy and the ingenuity of his moves, thus he managed to fight evenly with a narrow margin. After the twentieth stance, he was getting more and more

comfortable in utilizing the secret from the Sheng Huo Ling on top of the martial art from the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi.

Changseng Wang earned his title 'Eternal Victory' because in his entire life he had never met any worthy opponent. This time he felt like his hands and feet were bound by the enemy, which he had never experienced before; naturally he was astonished, but also scared.

After thirty stances, Zhang Wuji made a step forward and suddenly sat on the deck, while grabbing Changsheng Wang's calves. This strange move was an extremely profound move recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling. Although Changseng Wang knew about it, he had never dared to use it.

As Zhang Wuji grabbed the enemy, his ten fingers moved and sealed the 'zhong dou' [central capital] and 'zhu bin' [building guest] acupoints on Changseng Wang's calves, using the acupoint sealing technique of the Central Earth martial art. Changseng Wang felt the lower half of his body went numb and difficult to move; he heaved a deep sigh and let his hands caught by the enemy.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt a fondness in his heart toward this man's ability. "Thy martial art skill is excellent, I want to save your reputation. Quickly return to your ship," he said, while releasing his captive. Changsheng Wang was grateful and ashamed at the same time, he leaped back to his ship.

Dasheng Wang saw Changsheng Wang's bitter defeat, also saw how Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang fell into the enemy's hands, he realized that if the enemy's ship sank, Pingdeng Wang and the other three kings would also perish with them. He shouted his command, calling everyone to return to their ship.

Zhao Min loudly called out, "Quickly release Taj-kis and agree to Jin Mao Shi Wang's three requests!"

The remaining kings quietly discussed their situation. Zhihui Wang said, "Complying with thy requests is not a big deal. But this young master's martial art is obviously our Persian Sect's skill, where did he learn it from? We demand an explanation."

Stifling her laugh, Zhao Min maintained a solemn face and said, "Thou art naïve and lack of understanding, boastful and wishy-washy. This young master is our Cult Emissary's eighth disciple. His seven martial brothers will arrive soon. By that time, if the seven of them are upset, then it will be extremely awful for thou. Woe is thou ..."

Although Zhuhui Wang was intelligent, Chinese language is difficult and profound; he only understood around 60, 70% from what Zhao Min said, but he was certain she was blowing her horn. He hesitated a moment before saying, "Very well! Send Taj-kis over to their ship."

Two Persian cult members took Taj-kis to the bow of Zhang Wuji's ship. Zhou Zhiruo raised her sword. 'Ding, ding!' immediately the shackles on Taj-kis' hands and feet were cut off. Seeing the sharpness of the Sword, those two Persians were scared to death; they hastily leaped back to their ship.

"Thou may set sail immediately, return to the Central Earth," Zhihui Wang said, "We will send a small boat to follow behind thy ship."

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "The Central Earth Ming Cult came from Persia, thou and us are like brothers. Today we had a misunderstanding. I respectfully wish thou

do not keep this in thy mind. I invite you to visit the Brightness Peak in the future, we will drink wine and have a pleasant chat together. For the offenses of today, herewith Xiongdi [brother] apologize.”

Zhihui Wang laughed out loud and said, “Thy martial art skill is excellent, you’ve won our utmost admiration. For those who learn some kind of skill, isn’t it a delight to train it to perfection? A friend comes visit from afar, isn’t it a delight to the host? Even if they are upset, shouldn’t they be delighted?”

Zhang Wuji and the others were surprised to hear him quoting Kongzi [Confucius], showing that he was an educated man, he was able to respond accurately to Zhao Min’s remarks earlier. They all laughed.

Zhao Min said, “What you say is very good; you are truly a distinguished Persian, a true rarity! I wish you all a prosperous and long life, blessed with abundance and kept from calamities, free of sickness until the day you die.”

Zhihui Wang understood the four character ‘prosperous and long life’ [duo1 fu2 duo1 shou4], so he believed the rest were also good wishes for him. He smiled and mumbled, “Many thanks, many thanks!”

Zhang Wuji realized that although Zhao Min was speaking amiably, she could turn vicious and hurl some cunning and provocative speeches. Right now they were among tigers and wolves, the night was still young and the dreams many; hence the earlier they get out of danger the better. Immediately he pulled the anchor and turned the rudder, he hoisted the sail and slowly drove the ship away.

All around them the Persians aboard their ships watched

how Zhang Wuji weigh the anchor and hoist the sail, a job for dozen of sailors, alone; a demonstration of an astonishing strength. They burst out in cheers. Someone tossed the mooring rope of a small boat, which Zhang Wuji caught and tied to the rear mast. The big ship towed the small boat, gradually they sailed away. There were two people on the small boat, a man and a woman; they were none other than Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi.

Zhang Wuji manned the rudder and steered the ship westward, he saw that the Persian ships did not pursue. Quickly they sailed away for several 'li's, until the ships by the Ling She Island looked no more than one inch big, yet they were still unmoving, so finally he felt relieved. He asked Xiao Zhao to handle the rudder, while he went into the cabin to check on Yin Li's condition.

Yin Li was still in a blurry condition, half-asleep and half-awake. Although she did not seem to improve, but her sickness did not get worse either. Zhang Wuji thought that in this big Persian ship, there must be some medicine around.

Taj-kis was standing on the bow with her eyes gazed into the ocean. She heard Zhang Wuji walk on the deck, but she did not turn her head. Zhang Wuji saw her from behind, and had to admit that her figure looked beautiful and elegant; her beautiful hair floated in the wind, the back of her neck as white as the white jade. Xie Xun said she was the Wulin world's most beautiful woman in the past, it was certainly not an empty word. He imagined her standing by the bank of the Bi Shui Han Tan, with her purple gown as beautiful as a flower, her sword as brilliant as the snow; he wondered how many heroes and warriors's hearts had fallen because of her.

Sailing until the evening, they had left Ling She Island approximately a hundred 'li's behind. Looking to the east they did not see a single sail on the surface of the ocean; obviously the Persian Central Cult did not dare to pursue them under their threat.

"Yifu," Zhang Wuji said, "Can we release them now?"

"Very well!" Xie Xun replied, "Even if they want to pursue, they won't overtake us."

Zhang Wuji unsealed Pingdeng, Gongde, Zhanghuo, three kings, and Miaofeng Shi's acupoints, while apologizing to them repeatedly. He took them to the stern and helped them to leap into the small boat.

Miaofeng Shi said, "We are responsible for these six Sheng Huo Ling; losing them is not a small offense. Please return them to us."

Xie Xun said, "Sheng Huo Ling is the Central Earth Ming Cult's token of authority; today it returned to its rightful owner, how can we let you take it away?"

Miaofeng Shi talked incessantly, insistent that the tablets be returned to him. Zhang Wuji thought he must subdue Miaofeng Shi's heart today to avoid more trouble in the future. He said, "If we return these tablets to you, your ability is still too low. I am afraid you won't be able to defend them. Rather than letting some strangers snatch them away, don't you think it would be better if the Ming Cult has them?"

"How can some strangers casually snatch them away?" Miaofeng Shi asked.

"If you don't believe me, then let us try," Zhang Wuji said,

handing over the six Sheng Huo Ling tablets to him.

Miaofeng Shi was delighted; he had barely uttered, “Many thanks!” when Zhang Wuji hooked with his left hand and pulled with his right, taking the six tablets back.

Miaofeng Shi was surprised and angrily said, “I was not even ready, that one did not count.”

Zhang Wuji smiled, “All right, there is no harm in trying again,” he said, handing the Sheng Huo Ling back to him.

Miaofeng Shi put the four tablets of Sheng Huo Ling into his bosom first, and then held the two tablets in his hands tightly. Seeing Zhang Wuji reached out to snatch, he moved the Sheng Huo Ling in his left hand to hit Zhang Wuji’s wrist. Zhang Wuji flipped his wrist and grabbed Miaofeng Shi’s right arm and pulled it up so that two Sheng Huo Ling struck each other. ‘Clang’ the noise shook their hearts. Zhang Wuji transmitted his abundance internal energy to Miaofeng Shi’s arm.

Both of Miaofeng Shi’s arms were numb because of this attack, his whole body lost its strength as if he was paralyzed, so that the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands fell onto the deck. Zhang Wuji took the four Sheng Huo Ling from his bosom first before taking the ones on the deck.

“Well?” he said, “Do you want to try it again?”

Miaofeng Shi’s face was ashen. “You are not a human,” he stammered, “You are the devil, you are the devil!” He took several steps backward and was about to jump into the small boat, but he staggered and tumbled down. Liuyun Shi leaped up to carry him down.

The small boat raised its sail. Gongde Wang pulled the towing rope. 'Snap!' the rope broke and the small boat was separated from the big ship. Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Please forgive us for the many offenses."

Gongde Wang and the others' eyes were full of hatred, they turned their heads around without answering. The big ship rode on the wind and sailed to the west, two boats were getting farther and farther away from each other.

Suddenly Taj-kis cursed, "Bastard! How dare you?" She jumped into the water.

Zhang Wuji was shocked and hastily turned the rudder. He saw blood bubbling up from the water, followed by another one some distant away. Altogether there were six bloody areas with bubbles up to the surface.

With a splash Taj-kis' head appeared from below the surface with a short dagger in between her teeth, her right hand was holding a Persian man's hair, which appeared above the water shortly.

Zhang Wuji turned the rudder quickly to meet them, but the hull of that ship was too big; because of the strong wind, instead of turning around, the ship slowly made a big circle on the water. In the water, Zi Shan Long Wang was as agile as a fish; without taking too much time, she had reached the ship. Her left hand reached the anchor and with one pull she flew up, taking the Persian along with her, to the deck.

Everybody realized now, that the Persians had concealed this disastrous thought. They waited until Gongde Wang and the others safely moved to the small boat, then they raised the sail to cover up some people who went underwater toward the big ship, with the intention of sinking Zhang Wuji

and the others to the bottom of the sea. Fortunately, Zi Shan Long Wang noticed the bubble in the water from these people's breathing, leaped into the sea, and managed to kill six of them while capturing one alive. She was about to interrogate this survivor when suddenly there was a loud explosion coming from the aft; followed by black smoke rising to the sky. The hull shook violently, as if it was hit by a cannon; the mast broke and the top part flew into the air.

Zhang Wuji and the others felt a searing heat; hastily they ducked down. "What a wicked scheme!" Taj-kis called out. She rushed to the mast and saw a big hole on the aft, while the rudder disappeared without any trace. Water rushed in from the hole. Taj-kis asked several questions in Persian to the man she captured, and then her palm struck down toward his skull, smashing his head altogether. She kicked his body to the ocean while saying, "I only knew they were trying to make some holes on the ship; I did not think they planted explosive on the aft."

By this time Gongde Wang and the others had sailed quite some distance away on their small boat; although Taj-kis' water skill was excellent, there was no way she could overtake them. Everybody looked at each other in blank dismay, not knowing what to do. Zhao Min gave Zhang Wuji a sorrowful look while thinking in her heart, "The enemy ships will be over very soon; all of us will certainly die without any burial place."

The ship was really big, so that it would not sink too quickly. Amidst that commotion, suddenly Taj-kis spoke to Xiao Zhao in Persians, to which Xiao Zhao also replied in Persian. Two people spoke back and forth, their expressions kept changing irregularly. They noticed Xiao Zhao glanced at Zhang Wuji with blushing cheeks, she looked bashful. Taj-kis kept talking to her with a stern voice. They talked for half a

day; apparently they were arguing over something. Afterwards, it sounded like Taj-kis was urging Xiao Zhao to do something, while Xiao Zhao kept shaking her head without saying anything. Finally, she suddenly looked toward Zhang Wuji, heaved a deep sigh, and said two sentences. Taj-kis stretched out her arms to embrace her and kept kissing her, tears streaming down from their eyes. Xiao Zhao was sobbing, while Taj-kis comforting her in gentle voice.

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo looked at each other in bewilderment, not knowing what was happening. Zhao Min whispered in Zhang Wuji's ears, "Look, their faces look alike!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, he noticed Taj-kis and Xiao Zhao both had delicate and elegant melon-seed-shaped faces, high nose and snow-white complexion, graceful like rippling waves of autumn. Their facial features were about 60, 70% similar, only on Xiao Zhao, the Persian heritage was but a shadow, while Taj-kis looked more foreign than a Central Earth woman. Zhang Wuji recalled at the little wineshop in Dadou, when Ku Toutuo Fan Yao saw Xiao Zhao, he said, 'Looks alike, looks alike!' Turned out what he meant by 'look alike' was that Xiao Zhao looked very much like Zi Shan Long Wang. Was Xiao Zhao Taj-kis' younger sister, then? Or was she her daughter?

Zhang Wuji also remembered how Yang Xiao and Yang Buhui, father and daughter, had always been suspicious toward Xiao Zhao. Whenever he asked Yang Xiao why he seemed wary toward a young girl like Xiao Zhao, Yang Xiao only said that Xiao Zhao reminded him of his old enemy, yet he did not elaborate further. Only now did Zhang Wuji understand that Yang Xiao felt Xiao Zhao's appearance looked very much like Zi Shan Long Wang; only he did not have any other evidence. Besides, Zhang Wuji was

protective toward her, thus it was inconvenient for Yang Xiao to accuse her blatantly. Now it also became clear to him why Xiao Zhao deliberately twisted her mouth and made her nose crooked, painstakingly pretended to be an ugly girl.

Suddenly he recalled another matter, “Why did Xiao Zhao roam around the Brightness Peak? How did she know the entrance to the secret passage? I am sure it was Zi Shan Long Wang who ordered her to go there; obviously with the intention to steal the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual. She became my servant and has already been by my side for two years, and I have never suspected her. She had seen the manual; hereafter, if she want to write a copy, it would be as easy as taking something out of her own pocket. Aiyo! I only knew she was an innocent young girl; who would have expected that she is a shrewd schemer. These past two years were like a dream to me, I was constantly under her mercy without even realizing it. Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, in all your life you always believe others too easily, that was very stupid! Indeed, even a little girl like her was able to play with me on her palm.”

Thinking to this point, he could not help but feel angry. Right at that moment, Xiao Zhao’s eyes met with his. Zhang Wuji saw that her gaze was tender with unbounded passion, without any hint of pretense in it. His heart was shaken; he remembered how on the Brightness Peak, when he was battling the Six Major Sects, Xiao Zhao had protected him without any regard of her own safety, how during these two years she had ironed his clothes and taken good care of his daily needs. Could those actions be faked? Or could it be that he had accused her unjustly? While he was busy with his thoughts, the ship shook again and sank down quite a bit more.

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Taj-kis said, “All of you do not need to

panic. When the Persian ships arrive, Xiao Zhao and I will deal with them. Zi Shan Long Wang is only a woman, but she knows how to be responsible of her own actions; in no way she would implicate others. Zhang Jiaozhu and Xie San Ge have shown kindness as heavy as a mountain to me; Taj-kis herewith expresses her gratitude to you.” While saying that, she gracefully bowed to the ground.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun hastily returned her respects; each of them thinking, “These Persians are evil and cruel; they are going to capture you and burn you to death, and will certainly not let us go.”

The ship gradually sank down; the water had reached the cabin. Zhang Wuji carried Yin Li, and Zhou Zhiruo carried Zhao Min, they all climbed up the mast. Suddenly Xiao Zhao pointed her finger to the east and broke into crying again. Everybody turned their eyes to follow her finger, and saw in the distant some sails on the surface of the ocean. Before long, the sails grew bigger and bigger; they were indeed a dozen or so big Persian ships coming to pursue them.

Zhang Wuji thought, “If I were Taj-kis, I’d rather jump into the ocean and die rather than suffering the pain of being burned alive.” But when he looked at her, her expression was calm, she hardly showed any anxiety or fear; he had to admit his admiration, “She was the chief of the Si Da Fa Wang [Four Great Judge – see my notes earlier on ‘hu jiao fa wang’]; she is truly an extraordinary lady. To think that in the past, Yi Wang, Shi Wang and Fu Wang [eagle, lion and bat kings] have already achieved fame as senior heroes, while she was just a teenage girl; for her to be ranked above the three kings, it could not be just because of one time merit she rendered. She must have had some other quality, which surpassed other people.”

Seeing the Persian ships gradually come near, he thought, "My offense toward the Bao Shu Wang [Precious Tree Kings] is not small, if I fall into their hands, I might as well forget about escaping alive. Only I have to find a way to save Yifu, Miss Zhao, Miss Zhou, and cousin. Xiao Zhao, oh, Xiao Zhao, you can betray me, but I cannot treat you unkindly."

By now, a dozen or so Persian ships were within sight; he could see that the cannons on those ships were aimed at the sunken ship's mast. The ships stopped within twenty some 'zhang's from the sunken ship, and they rolled the sail and dropped the anchor right away. He heard Zhihui Wang laugh heartily. He looked very smug when he called out, "Do thou surrender now?"

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji replied, "The warriors of the Central Earth would rather die unyielding; how can we surrender? True warriors would contend with martial arts to decide who's strong and who's weak."

Zhihui Wang laughed; "True warriors battle with wits and not with brute force. Hurry up, extend your hands to be bound!"

Taj-kis suddenly spoke several sentences in Persian; her demeanor was stern. Zhi Hui Wang was stunned; he also replied in Persian. Two people asking and answering for a while; Dasheng Wang also joined the conversation. After several more exchanges, the big ship released a small boat with eight sailors rowing it, coming near the sunken ship.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Taj-kis said, "Xiao Zhao and I will go over there first, please wait for us here for a moment."

"Mrs. Han," in a stern voice Xie Xun said, "The Central Earth Ming Cult's treatment to you was not bad. Our Cult's safety and danger, its prosperity or fall, is on Wuji's shoulder alone."

If you betray us, the Old Xie won't show any compassion. If you harm a single strand of Wuji's hair, even becoming a ghost the Old Xie will not spare you."

With a cold laugh Taj-kis said, "If your foster child is so precious, do you think my daughter is merely dirt?" While saying that she took Xiao Zhao's hand and lightly jumped into the small boat. The eight sailors immediately rowed; the small boat sailed as if it was flying toward the big ship.

Listening to her words, everybody was startled. "Xiao Zhao is indeed her daughter," Zhao Min said.

From a distance they saw Taj-kis and Xiao Zhao board the ship and talk with the Precious Tree Kings; while their own ship was sinking. The mast went into the water inch by inch. Xie Xun sighed and said, "Different people, different hearts. Wuji Child, I am mistaken about Mrs. Han, and you are mistaken about Xiao Zhao. Wuji, a real man can be bent and can be stretched; we will endure disgrace for a while, waiting for a good opportunity to escape. You bear a very heavy responsibility on your shoulders, millions of common people of the Central Plains place their hopes in our Ming Cult to lift the banner of righteousness high and to repel the Tartars. When the opportunity comes, you'll have to escape, you cannot think others. You are the leader of a great Cult, you must be able to distinguish the important from the trivial."

Zhang Wuji hesitated without answering. "Pei!" Zhao Min spat and said, "It is still questionable whether you will stay alive, yet you worry about Tartars. Tell me, which one is better, the Mongolians or the Persians?"

Zhou Zhiruo had always been silent, but now suddenly she opened her mouth, "Xiao Zhao loves Zhang Gongzi very

much, she won't betray him."

"Didn't you see Zi Shan Long Wang coercing her?" Zhao Min said, "Xiao Zhao was not willing, but later the pressure was getting unbearable that in the end she relented, but still pretended to cry loudly."

By this time, the mast was only about a 'zhang' [about 10 feet or 3 meters] away from the water, the waves splashed and made everybody's face wet. Zhao Min suddenly laughed and said, "Zhang Gongzi, it is so neat that we are going to die together. That traitor Xiao Zhao, on the contrary, cannot die with us."

These words were spoken jokingly, but the meaning was deep. Zhang Wuji was really touched; he said in his heart, "I cannot take them all as my wives, but if I can die together with them, then my life is not in vain." He looked at Zhao Min, then looked at Zhou Zhiruo, and also looked at Yin Li in his embrace. Yin Li was still unconscious, while Zhao and Zhou two girls were blushing, with drops of water on their faces. They looked as beautiful as fresh flowers; if the Zhao girl could be likened to a rose, then the Zhou girl was an orchid. His heart was filled with warm and fuzzy feelings.

Suddenly, the Persians on a dozen or so ships shouted together. Zhang Wuji and the others were startled; they focused their eyes to look. They saw the people on each ship were kneeling down on the decks; they were bowing toward the big ship. On the big ship, all the Precious Tree Kings were also bowing toward someone sitting on a chair, whose features looked like Xiao Zhao's. Only the distance was too far that they were not able to see clearly.

Zhang Wuji and the others were alarmed and unsure of what trick these Persians were about to do. After shouting for a

while, the Persians stood up, but the sound of shouting did not stop; however, the shout was obviously a shout of joy, as if they were happily celebrating something. A moment later, the small boat returned with Xiao Zhao on board, sitting majestically.

“Zhang Gongzi, everybody,” she waved, “Let us go to the big ship. The Persian Ming Cult will not dare to harm you.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

“You will find out later,” Xiao Zhao replied, “How could Xiao Zhao answer Zhang Gongzi if they still have ill intention toward you?”

“Xiao Zhao,” suddenly Xie Xun asked, “Did you become the Persian Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu?”

Xiao Zhao lowered her head without answering, but a moment later two drops of crystal-clear tears suddenly hang from her eyes. All of a sudden Zhang Wuji’s ears buzzed, because he had guessed with 70, 80% certainty what was happening; his heart was grieved but also full of gratitude.

“Xiao Zhao,” he said, “You did this because of me!” Xiao Zhao turned her head to the side, she did not dare to meet his eyes.

Xie Xun sighed and said, “To have a daughter like you, Tajik is truly worthy to bear the illustrious name of Zi Shan Long Wang. Wuji, let’s go.”

He was the first to jump into the small boat, followed by Zhou Zhiruo carrying Yin Li and Zhang Wuji with Zhao Min in his arms. The eight sailors immediately rowed the boat toward the big ship.

When they were still more than ten 'zhang's away from the big ship, the Precious Tree Kings had already bowed to welcome their Cult Leader.

As they came aboard the big ship, Xiao Zhao gave her orders and immediately several people respectfully presented them with towels and food, and they were led to a cabin to change their wet clothes.

Zhang Wuji saw his cabin was very spacious. The room was illuminated by pearl and jewels; and it was furnished with countless precious objects. He was just about to dry his body with a towel when suddenly with a creaking noise the door was opened and somebody came in. It was Xiao Zhao, with a set of short shirt and pants, and a long robe in her hands.

"Gongzi," she said, "Let me help you change your clothes."

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. "Xiao Zhao," he said, "You are the Central Cult's Jiaozhu. Technically, I am your subordinate. How can you do this anymore?"

"Gongzi," Xiao Zhao begged him, "This is for the last time. Hereafter, we will be separated by tens of thousands 'li's from east to west. Our time is limited. After this time, even if I want to serve you, I cannot."

Zhang Wuji was heartbroken; he had no choice but to let her help him change his clothes, button his shirt, and tie his belt, just like she used to do. She also took a comb and combed his hair, all the while tears were streaming down her cheeks. Zhang Wuji could not restrain himself much longer; he turned around and hugged her petite stature in his bosom.

“Ah,” Xiao Zhao exclaimed softly, her body trembled slightly.

Zhang Wuji planted a deep kiss on her cherry lips. “Xiao Zhao,” he said, “At first I thought you were betraying me; I had never expected you to treat me this good.”

Xiao Zhao leaned her head on his broad chest. She whispered, “Gongzi, I did lie to you. My Mama was one of the Central Cult’s three Holy Maidens. She received an order to come to the Central Earth to set up a merit, so that when she returns to Persia, she would take over the Jiaozhu position. Unexpectedly, after meeting my Father her feelings were difficult to suppress, hence she had no choice but to commit apostasy and marry my Father. Mama knew she was guilty of a capital crime; thereupon she passed on the Holy Maiden’s seven-color gem ring to me, told me to go among the Brightness Peak people and try to steal the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual. Gongzi, I continuously concealed these things from you, but in my heart, I have never had any ill intention towards you. I would rather be your servant, serving you for the rest of my life, and never leave you, than being the Jiaozhu of the Persian Ming Cult. I have told you that haven’t I? And you have promised you would let me do that, haven’t you?”

Zhang Wuji nodded; he held her gentle body and sat her on his knees, and he kissed her again and again. Her warm and soft lips were wet with tears; they tasted sweet as honey, yet also bitter from pain.

Xiao Zhao continued, “I have memorized the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual, but that was not because I wanted to betray you. I would never have divulged this information if the mountains were not exhausted and the rivers used up ...”

“I know,” Zhang Wuji softly said, “I understand everything

now.”

As if she was talking to herself, Xiao Zhao said in a soft voice, “When I was little, I often saw Mama was restless and frightened, day and night. She covered up her fine appearance by pretending to be an old and ugly granny. She would not allow me to be seen with her; she let another family raise me up, and would only see me every one or two years. Only now do I understand that she braved this great danger just to be married with my Father. Gongzi, if not for the situation we were in today, I would not be willing to be the empress of this whole world, let alone be a cult leader.”

Speaking to this point, her cheeks were fiery red. Zhang Wuji felt the tender body in his embrace go warmer; his heart was moved, but suddenly Taj-kis’ voice was heard from outside the door, “Xiao Zhao, if you cannot restrain your passion, you are endangering Zhang Gongzi’s life.”

Xiao Zhao trembled and jumped up. “Gongzi,” she said, “You should forget me. Miss Yin has followed Mother [here the original word was ‘mu qin’, a formal term for ‘mother’, while before, she used the term ‘Mama’] for many years, she is also passionately devoted to you; she will be a good match to you.”

In a low voice Zhang Wuji said, “We’ll break out and kill, capture one or two Bao Shu Wang, and force them to take us to the Ling She Island.”

Xiao Zhao sadly shook her head, “This time they are ready; at this very moment, there are Persians with unsheathed blades standing by Xie Daxia, Miss Yin and the others. As soon as we make our move, they will be killed immediately.” While saying that she opened the cabin door. They saw Taj-kis was standing by the door, with two Persians wielding

swords standing behind her. Those two Persians bowed toward Xiao Zhao, but their swords did not leave Taj-kis' back.

Fearlessly Xiao Zhao walked up the deck, with Zhang Wuji following behind her. They saw Xie Xun and the others, each one with Persian warrior by their side, wielding a naked blade.

"Gongzi," Xiao Zhao said, "Here is some Persian medicine, effective to treat wounds; please apply it to Miss Yin." She then spoke several sentences in Persian. Gongde Wang took a bottle of medicine and handed it over to Zhang Wuji.

"I have ordered some people to take you back to the Central Earth; we'll part here," Xiao Zhao continued, "Xiao Zhao's body will be in Persia, but every day my prayer is that Gongzi will have happiness, good health, and peace; and that everything you do will be successful." Speaking to this point she choked and started crying.

"You will be living among the tigers and the wolves," Zhang Wuji said, "Please be careful." Xiao Zhao nodded and ordered her people to prepare a ship.

Xie Xun, Yin Li, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo boarded the ship one by one. Xiao Zhao returned the Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword to Zhang Wuji. With a bitter smile she raised her hand to bid them farewell.

Zhang Wuji did not know what to say; he stared blankly at her for a moment before finally he leaped into the ship. The big ship Xiao Zhao was riding sounded its horn. Both ships set sail at the same time, the distance between them gradually increased. Xiao Zhao was standing on the bow, her eyes fixed on Zhang Wuji's ship. Two people looked at each

other while the sea between them got wider and wider. Finally, Xiao Zhao's ship was only a black dot on the dark blue sea. The strong wind from afar blew on the sail, faintly carrying the sound of soft crying.

End of Chapter 30.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Chapter 31 - Saber and Sword Lost, People Perish

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo said, "What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me?"

Zhang Wuji kissed her left cheek gently while saying, "You are such a gentle and cultured lady, a dignified, worthy, warm and virtuous wife; how can you make a mistake?"

Even after the Persian medication was applied, Yin Li's high fever did not subside; she kept talking in her sleep incessantly. During these past several days on the sea, she had been exposed to cold weather on top of her sickness. The medication was only for external wound, it was not effective to treat internal injury, or even a common cold. Zhang Wuji was very anxious. Toward the afternoon of the third day, he saw a small island in the distant to their east. He instructed the sailor to take them to that island.

Once they were ashore, their spirits lifted up. The island's circumference was no more than several 'li's; and it was covered with shrubs and short trees. Zhang Wuji asked Zhou Zhiruo to look after Yin Li and Zhao Min, while he went around looking for some medicinal herbs. However, the flora on that island was greatly different from the one in the Central Earth that Zhang Wuji did not recognize most of them. He walked farther and farther away without any result until the sky gradually turned dark, he had no choice but to return to their original position. He mashed whatever herbs he could find and fed them to Yin Li.

Six people gathered around the fire, eating and drinking. The air was heavy with the fragrance of the flowers and the freshness of the grass and the forest. It was quite different surroundings from the cramped cabin.

Yin Li was also in good spirits. "Ah Niu Gege," she said, "Why don't we spend the night here, and not return to the ship?"

They discussed her proposal and decided that it was a wonderful idea. They saw the water on that small island was warm and clear, also, there were no wild beasts around; everyone went to sleep peacefully.

As Zhang Wuji woke up early the next morning, he got up and took a step, but he staggered and almost fell down. He felt his legs were weak, which was quite unusual. He rubbed his eyes and saw the Persian ship was gone. His heart skipped a beat. Rushing to the shore he looked around without seeing any trace of the ship. This time he was really shocked.

“Yifu,” he called out, “Are you all right?” But Xie Xun did not answer. Hastily Zhang Wuji ran to the place Xie Xun slept and saw he was still asleep peacefully, which took most of his anxiety away.

The previous night, Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Yin Li went to sleep behind a large rock some distance away. He rushed to take a look, and saw Zhou Zhiruo and Yin Li were still sleeping side by side; but Zhao Min was nowhere to be seen.

In a glance he noticed that Yin Li’s face was full of blood. Stooping down to look closer, Zhang Wuji saw there were more than a dozen sharp blade cuts on her face, but she stayed unconscious. Hastily he reached out to check her pulse and was relieved when he felt faint pulses. Turning his attention toward Zhou Zhiruo, he saw that a large clump of her beautiful hair was cut, along with a piece of her left ear. Her blood had not congealed yet, but her face was smiling, as if she was having a happy dream. Under the light of the dawn, she looked like a sleeping hypericum in the spring; extremely tender and beautiful. His heart was painful as he called out, “Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou, wake up!”

Zhou Zhiruo stirred, but did not wake up. Zhang Wuji gently shook her shoulder and finally Zhou Zhiruo yawned and turned around, but she was still asleep. Zhang Wuji knew she must be drugged. There were too many strange things that happened the previous night; he fell into a deep sleep and this morning he felt weak and tired. He was certain that they were drugged.

After calling Zhou Zhiruo for a while without any result, he rushed back to Xie Xun and called out, "Yifu, Yifu!"

Xie Xun sat up in daze, "What is it?" he asked.

"It's terrible!" Zhang Wuji said, "We have fallen into a sinister plot." Briefly he told him about the missing Persian ship and the cuts suffered by Yin Li and Zhou Zhiruo.

"What about Miss Zhao?" Xie Xun asked in alarm.

"I did not see her," Zhang Wuji grimly said. Taking a deep breath, he tried to circulate his internal energy, but felt that his limbs were devoid of any strength; he could not transmit his energy at all. "Yifu," he blurted out, "We are poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' [ten fragrance muscle softener powder]."

Xie Xun had heard Zhang Wuji's narration on how the masters of the Six Major Sects were poisoned by Zhao Min with 'shi xiang ruan jin san' and how they were held captive in the Wan An Temple. He stood up and felt as if he was floating; as his legs were devoid of any strength. Calming himself down, he asked, "Did she take away the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword as well?"

Zhang Wuji looked around and sure enough, he did not see either the Saber or the Sword. He was so enraged that he

almost cried. Never would he imagine that Zhao Min was capable of doing this, taking advantage when he was in grave danger and employed such a sinister plot when he was down.

He was lost in thought for a moment. Then he remembered Yin Li and hastily went back to where Yin and Zhou, two women were sleeping. He pushed Zhou Zhiruo aside, but she was still fast asleep. He thought, "My internal energy is the deepest, hence I was the first to wake up. Yifu was next. Miss Zhou's internal energy is far below ours. It looks like she won't wake up for a while yet." Immediately he ripped a piece of his clothes to wipe the blood from Yin Li's oval face. He saw seven horizontal and eight vertical thin cuts crisscrossing her cheeks. Apparently, she was cut by the Yitian Sword.

Yin Li had lost a lot of blood after being injured by Zi Shan Long Wang Jin Hua Popo. As a result, the poison of the thousand spiders accumulated in her blood was also dispersed along with her blood, causing the swelling on her face to subside considerably. Hence, for these last several days, her face had slightly returned to its former look; the pretty look Yin Li had when she was younger. But right now, with these dozen of cuts, her face looked severely fearsome.

Zhang Wuji was both grieved and angry. Gnashing his teeth he said, "Zhao Min, oh, Zhao Min, if you fall into my hand and I spare you, then Zhang Wuji has lived in vain." Calming himself down he went to the hillside to gather some medicinal herbs to stop the bleeding. He chewed the herbs and applied it on Yin Li's face, also on Zhou Zhiruo's scalp and ear.

Zhou Zhiruo yawned and opened her eyes. Suddenly she saw Zhang Wuji was reaching out and groping her head. Her face

turned red from shyness. Reaching up to shove his arm away, she angrily said, "You ... what are you ..." Before finished speaking, she had felt the pain on her ear. Immediately she touched her ear and cried out, "Ah!" and jumped to stand up. "What ...?" she said, but suddenly she felt her knees weaken and she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom.

Zhang Wuji reached out to support her. "Miss Zhou," he comfortingly said, "Don't be afraid."

Seeing Yin Li's terrifying face, Zhou Zhiruo hastily lifted up her hand to touch her own face and asked in fear, "I ... Am I also ...?"

"No!" Zhang Wuji said, "You only suffer some minor wounds."

"Did those evil Persians do this? I ... Why didn't I feel anything?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and quietly said, "I am afraid ... I am afraid Miss Zhao did this. She poisoned our food and drink last night."

Zhou Zhiruo stared blankly for half a day. She stroked what remained of her ear and broke into tears. Zhang Wuji tried to console her, "You are lucky that the injury is not heavy. Your ear is damaged, but you can always put your hair down to cover it, others won't be able to see."

"Still talking about hair?" Zhou Zhiruo snapped, "My hair is also gone."

Zhang Wuji said, "You only lost some on top of your head; if you arrange the hair on both sides of your head ..."

"Why do I want to arrange the hair on both sides of my

head?" Zhou Zhiruo angrily said, "Up this moment you are still trying to protect your Miss Zhao."

This time Zhang Wuji bumped into a wall; he did not know what to say, so he became defensive, "I am not trying to protect her! She is cruel and merciless, harming Miss Yin this way. I ... I am not going to forgive her." Looking at Yin Li's face, he could not hold tears from coming down his eyes.

Facing this situation Zhang Wuji was at a loss; he sat down and tried to circulate his internal energy, and he realized that the degree of his poisoning was not shallow. Actually, the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' could only be neutralized by the antidote from Zhao Min's faction; but this time he tried to disperse the poison relying on his profound internal strength. Slowly he pushed the poison from his four limbs, condensed it into his 'dan tian', and then bit by bit he forced the poison out of his system.

After working hard for almost two hours, he felt that his effort had brought the desired effect. He was optimistic. Only, this technique required him to have the Jiu Yang Shen Gong foundation, which ruled out the possibility of him teaching it to Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo. He was hoping that after the poison in his system was flushed completely, he would be able to help Xie and Zhou two people driving the poison out of their systems.

This technique sounded simple, yet actually extremely complicated. Toward the afternoon of the seventh day, he only managed to drive out approximately 30% of the poison. Fortunately, this poison only prevent the victim from exerting their internal energy but harmless to their bodies.

For the first several days Zhou Zhiruo was angry, but afterwards she gradually got used to it. She helped Xie Xun

catching fish and shooting birds, boiling water and cooking their meals. At night she slept alone in a cave on the eastern end of the island, far away from where Zhang Wuji and the others lived.

Zhang Wuji was secretly ashamed, thinking that he was partly responsible for this disaster brought by Zhao Min. This Miss Zhao was obviously a Mongolian princess, an archenemy of his Ming Cult. Countless martial art experts of the Wulin world had fallen under her hands; yet surprisingly he did not guard against her at all. He felt he was so stupid.

Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo did not blame him; they did not even mention this problem to him, but he felt very bad in his heart. Sometimes when Zhou Zhiruo was looking at him, he felt as if she was saying, 'You are blinded by Miss Zhao's beauty, resulting in this great calamity.'

Yin Li's condition was getting worse. This little island was located on the Southern Sea [nan hai], most of the flora was not found in Hu Qingniu's medical manual. His medical knowledge might be profound, he did know perfectly well how to treat Yin Li's condition; but he did not have any medication in his hand. The trees on the island were short and small, barely enough to be used as firewood; otherwise, he would have had built a raft early on and braving the danger he would sail away to the sea. Alternatively, he would not be this anxious if he did not know any medical skill. This time he felt like tens of thousands sharp daggers gouging and cutting his heart day and night.

It was late in the evening one day; he chewed some medicinal herbs to be fed into Yin Li's mouth. This time the herbs entered Yin Li's throat with difficulty. His heart was broken; tears streaming down his face, dropped onto Yin Li's face.

Suddenly Yin Li opened her eyes, smiled faintly and said, "Ah Niu Gege, don't feel bad. I am going to the underworld to see that heartless, short-lived little rascal Zhang Wuji. I want to tell him that in this world there is an Ah Niu Gege who treats me this well; who is a thousand times, ten thousand times better than Zhang Wuji."

Zhang Wuji's throat choked; in that moment he was contemplating whether he should reveal to her that he was Zhang Wuji.

Yin Li grabbed his hand and said, "Ah Niu Gege, I have never agreed to marry you, do you hate me? I think you are lying to me because you only want to make me happy. I am ugly, my temperament is strange, why would you want to marry me?"

"No!" Zhang Wuji said, "I am not lying you. You are a good and kind-hearted girl. I consider myself lucky if I can take you as my wife. Why don't we wait until you are well, all things are settled, and then we can get married? What do you say?"

Yin Li reached out and gently caressed his cheek. Shaking her head she said, "Ah Niu Gege, I cannot marry you. I have given my heart early on to that ferocious heartless Zhang Wuji ... Ah Niu Gege, I am a little bit scared; will I meet him when I get to the underworld? Will he still be hateful towards me?"

Zhang Wuji realized she was speaking clearly, her cheeks were red; he was inwardly alarmed, "This is the symptom of the last ray of light, could it be that she is going to die today?" He was lost I thought that he did not hear what she said. Yin Li grabbed his hand and asked him again. Zhang Wuji tenderly said, "He will forever treat you well, as if you are his precious darling."

“Will he treat me half as good as you did?” Yin Li asked.

“Heaven is my witness,” Zhang Wuji said, “Zhang Wuji eagerly and sincerely loves you with all his heart. He has early on regretted that when he was little he treated you cruelly. He ... his feelings toward you are exactly the same as mine; there is not the least bit distinction.”

Yin Li sighed; a smile appeared on the corners of her mouth. “Then ...” she said, “Then I am happy ...” Her grip on his hand gradually loosened, her eyes slowly closed, finally she stopped breathing.

Zhang Wuji hugged her body tight, thinking that until the moment she died, she did not know that he was Zhang Wuji. All these times she had been losing her consciousness that he was unable to reveal the truth to her. Just before her death, when her consciousness was very clear, there was not enough time to talk. Actually, things had come this far, it really did not make any difference whether he revealed the truth or not. His heart was so much in pain that he cried without making any sound. He thought, “If Zhao Min did not cut her cheeks, her injury might not necessarily be incurable. If Zhao Min did not abandon us on this deserted island, we would have reached the Central Plains [zhong yuan] in a few days; surely I would have found a way to save her life.” Bitterly he muttered, “Zhao Min, your heart is like a serpent and scorpion. There will come a day when you will fall into my hand. Zhang Wuji will not spare your life in any way.”

Suddenly he heard a cold voice behind him, “When you see her beautiful, jade-like face, you won’t have a heart to do anything to her.” Turning around, he saw Zhou Zhiruo was standing in the breeze, her face showed contempt.

Zhang Wuji was grieved and ashamed at the same time; he

said, "I have made a vow by my cousin's body, if I do not punish that witch, Zhang Wuji won't have a face to live on this world."

"That would be the spirited pledge of a real man," Zhou Zhiruo said. She rushed a few steps forward and wept bitterly while stroking Yin Li's body.

Xie Xun also heard the noise of crying and went over. As he learned about Yin Li's death, he could not help but feel heartbroken.

Zhang Wuji went to a small hill to dig Yin Li's grave. The soil on that island was so shallow that he only dug for about two feet, and had already met hard rocks underneath. He did not have any shovel, so he had no choice but lay Yin Li's body in that shallow hole. He was about to heap dirt on her when he saw the blood traces on her swollen face; he thought, "Gravel and dirt piled on her face might scratch her." Thereupon he took some branches and weaved them above her body, then he carefully piled stones and rocks on top of the branches, as if she was still alive and he was afraid the stones might hurt her.

Finally, he cut a tree trunk, peeled the bark, and then using Yin Li's dagger he carved these words on it: 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li' and below it he wrote: 'Zhang Wuji Sincerely Stated'.

Everything was ready so at last he threw himself down and cried loudly. Zhou Zhiruo consoled him, "Miss Yin's feelings toward you were so deep and you also have showed her profound kindness. Only, do not forget what you have sworn today: you must kill Zhao Min to avenge her death; then Yin Jia Meizi [lit. (younger) sister of the Yin family] in the underworld will also smile."

Due to his intense grief, the poison that had been concentrated in Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' [pubic region] was dispersed once again, wasting his several days' worth of effort. As a result, he had to work hard for more than ten days to gradually condense the poison and expel it out of his system.

The weather on that small island was sizzling hot; but it had plenty of wild fruits, which they could pick without any trouble to satisfy their hunger, so their lives were not terribly difficult. Zhou Zhiruo was aware that Zhang Wuji was grieved over Yin Li's death, angered over Zhao Min's craftiness, and regretted Xiao Zhao's departure; so she treated him gently with consideration.

After Zhang Wuji transferred his divine internal energy to help Xie Xun expel the poison in his body, he should have done the same to help Zhou Zhiruo driving the poison out of her body. But this method of transferring energy required him to put one palm on her lower waist, and the other palm on the navel above her lower abdomen; how could a young man and a young woman touch each other in such intimate places? Yet without transferring his Nine Yang Divine Energy, how could he help her? He contemplated for several days without being able to make any decision.

That particular evening Xie Xun suddenly said, "Wuji, how many more days do you think we are going to stay on this island?"

Zhang Wuji was startled. "That is hard to say," he said, "I just hope there will be a ship sailing by and rescue us and take us back to the Central Earth."

"We have been here for more than a month," Xie Xun said, "Have you seen any shadow of a ship even from a distant?"

"I have not," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Exactly," Xie Xun said, "Perhaps tomorrow there will be a ship coming by, but then again, perhaps there will never be any ship passing by in a hundred years."

Zhang Wuji sighed, "This uncultivated island is outside the sailing route of the ocean ships; whether or not we can return to the Central Earth, is extremely uncertain."

"Hmm," Xie Xun said, "The antidote is hard to come by. Other than weakening the four limbs, if the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' remains in the body, does it have any other adverse effect?"

"If it is not too long, then there is no adverse effect," Zhang Wuji said, "But this kind of poison invades the muscle and erodes the bones; if it stays in the body too long, all the internal organs would unavoidably receive some damages."

"That's so," Xie Xun said, "Then why don't you think of some way to expel the poison from Miss Zhou's body as soon as possible? You said Miss Zhou and you have known each other since your childhood. At that time 'xuan ming han du' [the cold poison of Xuan Ming palm] was still inside your body, and she had shown kindness to you. Where else would you find gentle and virtuous woman like her? Could it be that you don't like her because she is not beautiful enough?"

"No, no," Zhang Wuji said, "If Miss Zhou is not beautiful then there is no beautiful women in the world."

"Let me make the decision for you, then," Xie Xun said, "Marry her. Then you don't need to worry about this man-woman propriety anymore."

Zhou Zhiruo was around when they started talking; suddenly hearing her name being mentioned, she was shy and blushed. She stood up and walked away. Xie Xun leaped and opened up his arms, blocking her way. "Don't go, don't go!" he said with a laugh, "Today I am the matchmaker, and I have made my decision."

"Xie Laoye Zi," Zhou Zhiruo angrily said, "You do not act your age! We are seeking a way to return to the Central Earth; how can you speak such nonsense in time like this?"

Xie Xun laughed heartily. "The joining of a man and a woman is an important matter of a lifetime; why did you say it is nonsense talk? Wuji, your parents were also on a deserted island when they bowed to the heaven and to the earth to become man and wife. If at that time they did not strictly follow the secular propriety and tradition, how in the world would there be a young fellow: you? Much less today you have your Yifu presiding at the wedding for you. Don't you like Miss Zhou? Don't you want to repel the poison in her body?"

Zhou Zhiruo covered her face and was about to walk away. Xie Xun pulled her sleeve while laughing, "Where are you going? Don't you think we are going to see each other tomorrow or the next day? Ah, I know! You don't want to call a blind man as your father-in-law."

"No, no, it's not that," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Xie Laoye Zi is a hero of this age ..."

"Do you agree, then?" Xie Xun asked.

Zhou Zhiruo simply replied, "No, no!"

"You think this Yizi [foster child] of mine is not a good husband material?" Xie Xun asked again.

Zhou Zhiruo was taken aback. “Zhang Gongzi’s martial art skill is unquestionably outstanding, his name is revered within the Jianghu,” she said, “To ... to have him as a husband, what else can I ask for? Only ... only ...”

“Only what?” Xie Xun asked.

Zhou Zhiruo cast a quick glance toward Zhang Wuji and said, “He ... in his heart he really likes Miss Zhao. I know that.”

Xie Xun clenched his teeth. “That lowly person Zhao Min has treated us this cruelly, how can Wuji still persist in his own wrong doing? Wuji, I want to hear it from your own mouth.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was torn; he remembered Zhao Min’s cheerful talks and her touching actions. He felt if he could take Zhao Min as his wife and be with her forever, then that would be his entire’s life happiness. But as he remembered the seven horizontal and eight vertical sword cuts on Yin Li’s face dripping-with-blood, he hastily said, “Miss Zhao is my archenemy. I want to kill her to avenge Biaomei’s [younger female cousin] blood.”

“That’s more like it,” Xie Xun said, “Miss Zhou, are you still jealous?”

In a low voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “I am not convinced, unless ... unless you tell him to make a vow. Otherwise, I’d rather die with poison in me than asking him to help me drive the poison away.”

“Wuji, quickly make a vow!” Xie Xun said.

Zhang Wuji dropped down on his knees and said, “I, Zhang Wuji, if I ever forget Biaomei’s deep hatred, let me not be

forgiven by the Heaven and the Earth.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I want you to state clearly; what are you going to do to that Miss Zhao?”

“Wuji, state it clearly at once,” Xie Xun said, “What ‘forgiven by the Heaven and the Earth’? Too ambiguous.”

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “That witch Zhao Min works for Tartars’ imperial family, makes our people’s live miserable, harms my fellow Wulin warriors, stole my Yifu’s precious Saber, and harmed my Biaomei Yin Li. As long as I live, Zhang Wuji will not dare to forget this deep enmity. If I violate my vow, let the Heaven loathe me, and the Earth curse me.”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled sweetly; she said, “I am afraid when the time comes, you won’t have a heart to make your move.”

“Listen to me,” Xie Xun said, “There is no particular day that is better than any other day. We are Jianghu’s warriors. We don’t fuss over detailed formalities and womenfolk’s mumbo-jumbo. As long as you, two young people, agree, then you can bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married today. The sooner you get rid of this ‘shi xiang ruan jin san’, the better.”

“No! Yifu, Zhiruo, please listen to me,” Zhang Wuji said, “Miss Yin had a very deep feeling toward me; she had always wanted me as her husband since she was young. In my heart I have also regarded her as my wife. Although there was no ceremony, we could be considered husband and wife. Now that her body and her bones are not yet cold, how can I tie another joyous relationship immediately?”

Xie Xun hesitated before saying, “That’s true. What do you

suggest, then?”

“In your child’s opinion,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Child will agree on an engagement with Miss Zhou today, and immediately help her repel the poison from her body; this will be much more convenient. Supposing the Heaven granted us returning to the Central Earth someday, Child will put Zhao Min to the blade and recapture the Tulong Saber, and return it to Yifu. At that time the marriage with Miss Zhou can be consummated. That way we satisfy both sides.”

Xie Xun laughed and said, “That sounds very good; but what if within ten years, eight years, we still are not able to return to the Central Earth?”

Zhang Wuji said, “After three years, no matter whether we can leave this island or not, Child will ask Yifu to preside over our marriage.”

Xie Xun nodded and asked Zhou Zhiruo, “Miss Zhou, what do you say?”

Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head without answering. After half a day she finally said, “I am a lone orphan, what idea do I have? I’ll leave everything on Laoye Zi’s hand.”

Xie Xun laughed heartily and said, “Very good! Very good! It’s settled. You two are engaged. No need to worry about custom and tradition. Wuji, drive the poison from my daughter-in-law away.” After saying this he walked toward the back of the hill in big strides.

“Zhiruo,” Zhang Wuji said, “That difficulty was caused by me, can you forgive me?”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “Because I am ugly, you tried

to refuse in every possible way. If it was Miss Zhao, I am afraid tonight you would have..." Speaking to this point, she turned her head around as she felt uncomfortable to continue.

Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat as he thought, "When we were adrift on that small boat, I was foolishly and presumptuously thinking of marrying four beauties. Actually the one my heart really loves is that won't-stop-at-any-crime, evil-and-sly little witch. People call me a hero in vain; in my heart I cannot differentiate good from evil, easily infatuated by a pretty face."

Zhou Zhiruo turned her head back. Seeing he was lost in thought as if in a trance, she stood up to walk away. Zhang Wuji reached out to grab her hand and pulled her down. Unexpectedly Zhou Zhiruo's internal energy was gone; her feet were weak. She staggered and stumbled back into Zhang Wuji's bosom. After struggling hopelessly, she angrily said, "Must you bully me for my whole life?"

Seeing her frowning and a bit angry, Zhang Wuji's heart was touched; he hugged her tender and soft body and said in a low voice, "Zhiruo, when we met on the River Han when we were both little, I have never imagined there will come a day like today. On the Brightness Peak I was alone facing four elders from Kunlun and Huashan, two sects; you gave me directions and saved my life. At that time I appreciated your loving care to me, but I did not dare to have any absurd thoughts."

Leaning on his bosom, Zhou Zhiruo said, "That day I stabbed you with a sword, don't you hate me?"
"You did not stab me on the chest," Zhang Wuji replied, "That's why I knew that you secretly have a feeling toward me."

“Pei!” Zhou Zhiruo spat, her cheeks blushed, she said, “If I knew early on that you are going to say that, I’d stab your chest, kill you neat and clean, so I’d avoid being bullied by you later on, listening to your nonsense.”

Zhang Wuji embraced her tighter and said, “Hereafter my love to you will be doubled or tripled, we are husband and wife, two people one body; how can I mistreat you?”

Zhou Zhiruo leaned some more to look at his face; she said, “What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me?”

Zhang Wuji’s face was only several inches apart from her egg shaped face, he felt her breath was like an orchid; he could not restrain from kissing her left cheek gently while saying, “You are such a gentle and cultured lady, a dignified, worthy, warm and virtuous wife; how can you make a mistake?”

Zhou Zhiruo gently caressed the back of his neck. “Even a saint erred,” she said, “Since I was little I had never had a father and a mother to instruct me. It would be difficult not to mess up sometimes.”

“Whatever your mistake is, I can advise you nicely,” Zhang Wuji said.

“Will you always be faithful to me?” Zhou Zhiruo asked, “Are you sure you won’t ever kill me?”

Zhang Wuji kissed her gently on her forehead; “Don’t have absurd ideas,” he said in a tender voice, “How can there be such thing?”

With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “I want you to

promise me with your own mouth.”

“All right!” Zhang Wuji laughed, “I will always be faithful to you. I won’t ever kill you.”

Staring at his eyes, Zhou Zhiruo said, “I don’t want you to joke around. I want you to take this seriously.”

Zhang Wuji laughed, “I wonder how many weird thoughts are in this small head of yours?” he said, while thinking in his heart, “Because I have shown feeling towards Zhao Min, Xiao Zhao and Biaomei that it is difficult for her to trust me. But from now on, how can there be this matter?” Thereupon he wiped the smile from his face and solemnly said, “Zhiruo, you are my beloved wife. Formerly I was double-minded [lit. three hearts two intentions]. I hope you won’t blame my past. From now on, I will always be faithful to you. Even if you make any mistake, I won’t blame you or scold you.”

“Wuji Gege [big brother Wuji],” Zhou Zhiruo said, “You are a real man; you must remember your own words to me tonight.” Looking at the rising bright moon she said, “The moon in the sky is our witness.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “You are totally correct, the moon in the sky is our witness.” Still holding Zhou Zhiruo in his bosom, he looked at the bright moon on the horizon and said, “Zhiruo, all my life I have suffered a lot because of other people’s deceits, I don’t know the amount of pain I have endured since my childhood; I lost track already. It was only on the Binghuo [ice and fire] Island, when I was with Father, Mother and Yifu, that I enjoyed peace without falling into other people’s deceitful schemes. The first time I arrived at the Central Plains [zhong yuan], I met with a beggar with a snake. He deceived me into poking my head into his sack to take a closer look; unexpectedly he covered the sack over my

head and kidnapped me. How could I guess that after going through life and death situation together, sharing the same trials and tribulations; on the very first night we arrived on this little island, Zhao Min has put violent poison in our food?"

Forcing a smile Zhou Zhiruo said, "You are a 'will-not-stop-until-you-reach-the-Yellow-River' type of person; but by the time you reach the Yellow River, it is too late to regret." [Translator's note: I know that I translated this passage rather literally; but I believe the readers will appreciate the imagery of the original sentence.]

Suddenly Zhang Wuji's heart was overwhelmed with happiness. "Zhiruo," he said, "You are the only one who has always loved me. You always treated me kindly. Someday when we return to the Central Plains, you will stay by my side and help me guard against lowly people's craftiness and deceits. With a worthy wife like you to help me, I can be spared of many hardships."

Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. "I am the most useless woman," she said, "I am weak and incapable, plus I am dumb. Let's not talk about the extremely smart Miss Zhao, whose intelligence compared to mine is as far as the heaven from the earth; I don't have any chance against Xiao Zhao, who possesses such a profound understanding in her heart. Your Miss Zhou is a naïve and dim-witted little girl; don't you know it by now?"

"You are an honest and considerate, intelligent and virtuous girl," Zhang Wuji said, "You will not deceive me."

Zhou Zhiruo turned around and hid her face in his bosom. "Wuji Gege," she said in tender voice, "To be able to marry you, my delight is unspeakable. I only hope you won't belittle

me because I am stupid and useless, and bully me because I am unworthy. I ... I will do my best to take care of you.”

The next day Zhang Wuji used the Jiu Yang Shen Gong to help Zhou Zhiruo expel the poison. At first they made a good progress; perhaps because she did not eat too much, her level of poisoning was not as severe as Xie Xun. However, toward the seventh day, suddenly he felt a resistance, which was ‘yin’ [negative/female] and cold in nature, coming from her body, fighting his Jiu Yang energy. Although Zhou Zhiruo strived to control this resistance, it was difficult for the Jiu Yang energy to enter her body. In his astonishment Zhang Wuji went to consult Xie Xun.

Xie Xun pondered for half a day before saying, “I don’t know for sure, but most likely it was because her Emei Pai’s masters were always women, the internal energy they train is ‘yin rou’ [negative/female, and soft/flexible] in nature.”

Zhang Wuji nodded his agreement. Luckily Zhou Zhiruo’s internal energy level was far below his, so that he was able to suppress the resisting ‘yin’ energy in her body; but by doing this he was required to use up a lot more energy than when he was helping Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji secretly felt that although at this moment her ‘yin’ energy was still weak, but her achievement in the future would not be a small matter.

“Zhiruo,” he praised, “Zunshi [revered master] Mijue Shitai was truly an expert of her generation. The internal energy cultivation method she passed on to you is extremely profound; I can feel it even now. If you train diligently, your energy level may run neck to neck with my Jiu Yang Shen Gong; you may even surpass me.”

“Don’t mock me!” Zhou Zhiruo said, “How can Emei Pai’s martial art be compared to Zhang Da Jiaozhu’s [great cult

leader Zhang] Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi?

“You have talent,” Zhang Wuji said, “Although you don’t know too many martial art forms and stances, your internal energy foundation is excellent. My Tai Shifu [grand master, he was referring to Zhang Sanfeng] once said, in the advance study of martial art, oftentimes the level of achievement each individual is closely related to one’s natural endowments. Furthermore, someone who is intelligent and possesses excellent comprehension may not necessarily capable of achieving the highest level of mastery. It was said that your sect’s founder, Zushi [ancestor master] Guo Nuxia’s [heroine Guo] father, Guo Jing Daxia [great hero] was slow, yet his martial art skill shook the world from the ancient time until today. Even Tai Shifu said that his energy level has not reached the level of Guo Daxia of the past. It seems to me that your Emei Pai’s internal energy cultivation technique is superior to the Wudang Pai’s; I’ll say that your future achievement may surpass Zunshi Mijue Shitai’s.”

Zhou Zhiruo rolled her eyes; faking anger she said, “If you want to flatter me, you don’t need to say my martial art is good. If I can master only 10 or 20% of Shifu’s ability, I would be satisfied. If you can teach me one or two techniques from your Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I would be very grateful.”

Zhang Wuji hesitated without answering. Zhou Zhiruo continued, “Do you think I am not fit to become Zhang Da Jiaozhu’s disciple?”

“No!” Zhang Wuji said, “I only aware that your internal energy technique is entirely different than mine. I’ll say our techniques took opposite approach from the start. If you learn my internal energy technique, you are facing a difficult and dangerous problem.”

"It's all right if you don't want to teach me," Zhou Zhiruo said, "The worst thing that can happen if I learn martial art skill is I fail; how can there be any danger?"

"No, no!" Zhang Wuji was serious, "My Jiu Yang Shen Gong is purely 'yang gang' [positive/male and hard/firm] in nature. Right now you are training in the Emei Pai's internal energy, which takes the purely 'yin rou' approach. If you also train my internal energy technique, then the 'yin' and 'yang' would collide in your body. Unless it is a martial art genius like my Tai Shifu; he might be able to combine water and fire, harmonize the firm and the supple. Otherwise, if you miss a single step, you'll face a terrible, terrible disaster. Mmm, let's wait until your internal energy is strong enough, I'll teach you the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory and you can start training it."

Zhou Zhiruo laughed, "I was only joking," she said, "Later on I will always be together with you; your martial art skill, my martial art skill, what difference does it make? I am too lazy, your Jiu Yang Shen Gong is very difficult to train, even if you force me to practice, I am afraid it will be too difficult for me." Hearing her saying this, Zhang Wuji felt sweetness in his heart.

With love and happiness in their hearts, time was passing swiftly. Several months had passed in a flash. Zhou Zhiruo's internal energy had been completely recovered; she did not feel anything unusual, hence she believed the poison had been completely expelled from her system.

One particular day, they saw the peach blossom trees on the eastern side of the island were blooming beautifully. Zhang Wuji picked several branches of the peach blossom and planted them in front of Yin Li's grave. He saw the piece of

wood he carved with the characters 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li' was laying flat on the ground; perhaps it was knocked down by some wild animals. He picked it up and re-inserted it deeply to the ground. He remembered how his cousin lived a miserable life; perhaps she did not even have a single day of happiness.

While he was still reveling in sadness, suddenly he heard the clamoring noise of seagulls on the sea. Lifting his head up, he saw a ship in the distant sailing toward the island. He was overjoyed at this unexpected scene and loudly shouted, "Yifu, Zhiruo, there's a ship coming in, there's a ship coming in!"

Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo heard his shout and they rushed together to the shore. In a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "How can there be a ship coming to this desolate island?"

"It's strange indeed," Zhang Wuji said, "Could it be that they are pirates?"

In less than an hour that ship had dropped its anchor offshore, and sent a small boat to the island. Zhang Wuji, three people, waiting for them on the beach. They saw the sailors on that small boat wear Mongolian naval military uniforms. Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "Could it be that Miss Zhao was pricked by her conscience and returned to this island?" Casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo, he saw that her beautiful eyebrows were slightly wrinkled, while her chest was heaving up and down; apparently she was very much concerned.

A short moment later the small boat landed. Five sailors stepped on to the beach. Their leader, a naval officer, bowed respectfully toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Are you Zhang Wuji, Zhang Gongzi [honorable master Zhang]?"

"I am," Zhang Wuji replied, "Who are you, Officer?"

As that officer heard Zhang Wuji answering in affirmative, he looked delighted and relieved. "Xiao Ren's [lit. little/lowly person, a subordinate addressing him/herself] humble name is Pastai. I truly am fortunate to be able to find Gongzi today. I have received order to find Zhang Gongzi and Xie Daxia and take you back to the Central Earth." He did mention Zhang and Xie, two people's names, but did not mention Zhou Zhiruo.

"Officer has toiled to come from afar, I wonder who has sent you?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Pastai replied, "Xiao Ren is a subordinate of Tawa-chelu, the local naval commander in charge of Fujian defense. We have received order from General Pordu to set sail and meet you. Altogether General Pordu dispatches eight ships to search for Zhang Gongzi and Xie Daxia on the water around Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong, three provinces. I can't believe in the end Xiao Ren is the one who render this great merit." His meaning was obvious; apparently his superior had promised promotion and great reward to whoever succeeded in finding Zhang Wuji.

Hearing that unfamiliar Mongolian general's name, Zhang Wuji thought the general must have received Zhao Min's order to find him at any cost. "How did your honorable superior find out about me?" he asked.

"According to General Pordu's instructions," Pastai replied, "Zhang Gongzi is a nobleman of high status, also a great hero of the present age. Xiao Ren was ordered that after we find you, we must serve Gongzi attentively. As for why we must find Gongzi, Xiao Ren's rank is too low for the

Mongolian General to explain the reason.”

“Is this Shaomin Junzhu’s idea?” Zhou Zhiruo interrupted.

Pastai was startled, “Shaomin Junzhu?” he asked, “Xiao Ren has not had any good fortune to see her.”

Zhou Zhiruo coldly said, “What good fortune or bad fortune?” “Shaomin Junzhu is our Mongolia’s most beautiful woman,” Pastai said, “No, she is the world’s most beautiful woman; well-versed in both pen and sword [wen wu quan cai – skilled in both literature and military], she is the Ruyang Wangye’s [prince of Ruyang] ‘qian jin’ [lit. thousand gold, the most valuable, honorable term for a daughter]. How can Xiao Ren have the good fortune of seeing her ‘jin mian’ [lit. golden face]?”

“Humph,” Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but didn’t say anything further.

“Yifu,” Zhang Wuji said to Xie Xun, “In that case, let us go aboard.”

“Let’s go back to our cave to fetch some things first before we embark the ship,” Xie Xun said, “Officer, please wait here for a moment.”

Pastai said, “Let Xiao Ren and the sailors get your luggage.”

Xie Xun laughed and said, “What luggage do we have? Please don’t bother.” Taking Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo’s hands, he went to the back of the hill and said, “Out of the blue Zhao Min sends a ship to take us back; she must have a sinister plan. How do you think we must deal with it?”

“Yifu,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Do you suppose ... do you suppose

Zhao Min ... she might be on board?"

"If this little witch is onboard, that would be better," Xie Xun said, "We must watch our food and drink; and not to fall into her trap again."

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "We'd better bring the salted fish and the dried fruit we have collected, also water from this island. We must not eat the food from the ship."

"I think Zhao Min is not onboard," Xie Xun said, "She wants to copy those Persians' plot; she lures us onboard, once we are on the open sea, then she'd send Mongolian navy ships to open fire and sink our ship."

Zhang Wuji's heart sank, with a trembling voice he said, "She ... is she that evil? She has left us stranded on this desolate island, let us live or die on our own, without any chance to return to the Central Earth, wasn't that enough? The three of us would not bother her anymore, would we?"

With a cold laugh Xie Xun said, "You have freed the masters of the Six Major Sects she held captive in the Wan An Temple; how could she not hate you to the bone? Besides, the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult is missing, at this moment, everybody in the Ming Cult, from the top to the bottom, is involved in the large scale search and rescue operation. There is no guarantee that they will not find this desolate island. Only by burying us in the bottom of the ocean floor would she be free of trouble forever."

"Firing their cannons?" Zhang Wuji said, "Wouldn't that mean Pastai and all these Mongolian sailors will deliver their lives in vain?"

Xie Xun laughed out loud, followed by a sigh, he said, "Wuji,

Child, those people wield power over the entire Mongolian armed forces; how can they value human lives? If they were like you, kind hearted and merciful, how can the Mongolians conquer four oceans, sweep hundreds of nations? From the ancient times, which great hero, who earned great honor, did not take the bull by its horns, if they must kill then they killed? Let's not talk about ordinary officers and soldiers, they would even kill their own father and mother, their sons and daughters."

Zhang Wuji was silent for half a day then grimly said, "Yifu is right." He had always known that the Mongolians were brutal and merciless toward their enemies, but surely they would cherish their own subordinates and people? At this moment, listening to Xie Xun, he felt as if his heart was torn in two: he wanted to return to the Central Earth, to hold command over the heroes and warriors in driving the Tartars away; but speaking about governing a country to maintain peace and security, he was convinced it was not in his power to do so.

"Yifu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "What shall we do?"

"What is in my daughter-in-law's mind?" Xie Xun asked.

"Can we not board the boat?" Zhou Zhiruo said, "Let's tell those Mongolian sailors that we enjoy living in this island and do not have any desire to return to the Central Plains."

Xie Xun smiled and said, "That is a naïve little girl's naïve idea. We do not want to go on board, do you think the enemy will let us go just like that? Let's say we kill everybody on this ship, officers and sailors alike, do you think they will not dispatch ten more, eight more ships to find us? Besides, there are a lot of important matters in the Central Plains, waiting for Wuji to attend to. How can we let him grow old and die on this deserted island?"

Zhou Zhiruo's pretty face blushed profusely. "Please give us instruction; we'll listen to Yifu's advice," she said in a low voice.

Xie Xun thought of a plan for a moment and then said, "Let's do it this way." Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo listened to his plan and agreed that it was a marvelous plan.

Zhang Wuji went to Yin Li's grave to pray and shed some farewell tears before embarking the ship. To fight boredom on the island, Zhou Zhiruo had carved many little wooden horses and wooden figurines. She wrapped everything in one big bundle and carried it on her back.

Zhang Wuji checked the cabin, inside and out, very carefully. Indeed Zhao Min was not onboard; he also made sure that there was nobody onboard who might do them harm. He noticed that the officers and sailors were not martial art practitioners.

After the ship had weighed the anchor, when they only set sail for dozens of 'zhang's, suddenly Zhang Wuji reached back and grabbed Pastai's right wrist, while his other hand snatched the saber hanging on Pastai's belt, and pressed the saber behind his neck. "Listen to my order," he shouted, "Tell the helmsman to turn eastward!"

Pastai was shocked, "Zhang Gong ... Gongzi," he trembled, "Xiao ... Xiao Ren does not dare to offend you."

"Listen to my orders," Zhang Wuji said, "If you disobey, I am going to chop your head."

"Yes, yes!" Pastai said, and shouted his order, "Helms ... helmsman! Quick ... turn the ship eastward!" The helmsman

turned the rudder to follow his command. The ship circled around the island and sailed to the east.

Zhang Wuji shouted, "You Mongolians are setting a trap to harm us. I have seen through your scheme. Quickly admit it! If you lie to me, I'll take your life." Having said that he raised his right palm and slapped the ship's edge. Wood debris flew everywhere, as a big chunk of wood came off from the ship's edge. The officers and sailors onboard watched with amazement.

Pastai said, "Gongzi, please understand: Xiao Ren received my superior's order to take Gongzi home; we don't have any other intention. Xiao Ren ... Xiao Ren only hoped to render a service and receive the rewards, we really do not have any ill-intention."

Zhang Wuji knew he was telling the truth; thereupon he released Pastai's wrist, walked to the bow, and lifted the iron anchor with his left hand, while his right hand also reached out and lifted another anchor. "Everybody, watch this!" he shouted, while throwing both anchors to the air. The Mongolians gasped and then cried out in alarm.

As the anchors fell back down, using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique, one hand snatched, the other pushed, Zhang Wuji threw the anchors back up to the air. He did this three times, before he finally caught the anchors and gently put them down on the bow. The Mongolians have always admired brave warriors; seeing this astonishing demonstration of prowess, they bowed down in respect and did not dare to disobey.

Following Zhang Wuji's instructions, the helmsman drove the ship to the east. They sailed on the open sea for three days, until the only thing they could see was mighty waves whose

heights reach the sky. Xie Xun anticipated that Zhao Min only dispatched battleships to search on the water around Fujian and Guangdong area; right now their ship had sailed deep into the ocean, so there was no way the battleships would find them.

After five days, they instructed the helmsman to turn northward. They continued heading north for more than twenty days, so that even if Zhao Min was ten times smarter, it would be difficult for her to guess the location of the ship correctly. Thereupon, they instructed the helmsman to turn the ship westward, towards the Central Earth. During their voyage of more than a month, Zhang Wuji and the others did not touch the food from the ship; they either ate the provisions brought from the island, or caught fish from the ocean.

Around the seventh hour one day [between 11am - 1pm], they saw land in the distance. The Mongolian officers and sailors had been on the sea too long; as they saw they were going home, everybody cheered in delight. By the nightfall, the ship had dropped its anchor by the shore.

The landscape of that area was mountainous and the seawater was really deep so the ship was able to moor right next to the stony shore.

“Wuji,” Xie Xun said, “Go ashore and find out what kind of place is this?” Zhang Wuji complied and flew ashore.

He explored for a while and everywhere he went, he saw green thick forest; with the snow that started to melt on the ground, turning the soil into deep mud. After walking for a while, the forest got darker. All around him were gigantic ancient pine trees, the trunks were so big that each one needed several people join hands to encircle it. He flew up a

tall tree to get a better view, and no matter which direction he looked he could not see the edge of the forest. Surprisingly, in this sea of trees, he did not see any sign of other human beings either. He thought even if he went further down the forest, he would see the same thing; therefore, he decided to return to the ship.

Before reaching the shore, he had already heard miserable shouts; and these extremely sad and shrill sounds were coming from the ship. He was shocked, rushed to the shore, and immediately flew to the bow.

He saw the deck was full of bodies scattered around; they were the Mongolian officers' and soldiers' corpses, from Pastai down to the last sailor. Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo were standing on the deck, but he did not see any trace of the enemy.

In shock he asked, "Yifu, Zhiruo, are you all right? Where is the enemy?"

"What enemy?" Xie Xun asked, "Did you see any trace of them?"

"No! But these Mongolians ..." Zhang Wuji said.

"Zhiruo and I killed them," Xie Xun said.

Zhang Wuji was even more stunned, "I did not expect these Mongolians would dare to harm us as soon as we return to the Central Earth," he said.

"They did not dare to harm us," Xie Xun explained, "I killed them to close their mouths. As they are dead, Zhao Min will not know that we have returned to the Central Earth. From now on, she is in the bright place while we stay in the dark. It will be easier for us to exact our revenge."

Zhang Wuji sucked a mouthful of cold air, and was speechless for half a day.

“What?” Xie Xun dryly said, “Are you blaming me for my cruelty? Tartars’ officers and soldiers are our enemies; are we supposed to treat them with the kindness of Bodhisattva?”

Zhang Wuji was silent; he remembered how these people had been taking care of them attentively, without the slightest degree of carelessness. Although they were enemies, he would not have the heart to kill them in cold blood like this.

“As the saying goes,” Xie Xun continued, “Those with small hearts are not people of noble characters, those who are not cruel are not real men. We don’t want to harm others, others want to harm us. That Zhao Min has treated us like this so we simply follow her way and do to her what she did to us.”

“Yifu is right,” Zhang Wuji said. But looking at Pastai and the others’ corpses, he could not hold tears from flowing down his cheeks.

“Make fire, burn the boat down,” Xie Xun said, “Zhiruo, search the bodies, take all gold and silver you can find. Also, get three swords or sabers for our self-defense.” Two people set the ship on fire then leaped to the shore.

The ship’s hull was really big hence it burned continuously until midnight before the fire gradually died down. The remnant of the ship, along with the bodies, slowly went down to the bottom of the ocean. It was a clean job, without the least bit of trace. Zhang Wuji had to admit that although his Yifu was merciless, he was a veteran of Jianghu, with experience far exceeding him.

Three people spent the night by the shore. They continued their journey southward early the next morning. It was not until the afternoon of the second day did they finally meet seven, eight ginseng pickers. As they asked the men, they found out that that place was Liaodong [East Liaoning], outside the great wall, not too far from Changbai Mountain.

When they left those men, Zhou Zhiruo asked, “Yifu, shall we kill those men to shut their mouths?”

“Zhiruo!” Zhang Wuji snapped, “What are you talking about? These ginseng pickers do not even know who we are. Must we kill everybody we meet along the way?”

Zhou Zhiruo was so ashamed that her face turned completely red. In all her life, Zhang Wuji had never spoken to her like that.

“If it were me,” Xie Xun said, “I’d kill those ginseng pickers. But since Jiaozhu is unwilling to shed too many blood, we must quickly find a way to change our clothes, to remove any trace of our identities.”

They immediately quickened their pace. After walking briskly for two days, they finally left the forest. But it was not after walking another day did they finally see a peasant family’s home. Zhang Wuji took out some silver coins to buy clothes from the peasant, but the family was so poor that they did not have any extra clothes to sell. After going to seven, eight different homes, finally they were able to collect three sets of totally filthy clothes. Zhou Zhiruo was used to cleanness; smelling the stench accumulated over several years, she almost threw up. But Xie Xun was delighted; he instructed his two companions to smear their faces with mud. When Zhang Wuji looked at his reflection in the water, he saw a Liaodong’s beggar. Zhao Min might not necessarily recognize him even if she was standing right in front of him.

As they continued walking southward, they entered the Great Wall. One day they arrived at the suburb of a big town. Three people went straight to a big restaurant.

Zhang Wuji took three 'liang's worth of silver from his pocket and gave it to the innkeeper; he said, "You can settle the bill after we are done eating." He was afraid that the innkeeper would not give them any food because of the way they dressed in ragged clothes.

Who would have thought that the innkeeper stood up respectfully and returned the silver with both hands, saying, "We thank Masters for patronizing our humble establishment; what is some insipid wine and crude rice? Please accept it as a compliment of our small inn."

Zhang Wuji was very surprised. As they were seated, he said in low voice to Zhou Zhiruo, "Has our masquerade been exposed? Why did the innkeeper refuse our money?"

Zhou Zhiruo examined their clothes and appearance carefully, they did look like three beggars; which movement or expression of theirs had given them away?

"From the way that innkeeper speaks, I can tell that he is afraid of something," Xie Xun said, "We must be careful."

They heard some footsteps on the stairway as seven men walked in. As chance had it, these men also dressed as beggars. These seven men went to sit on the table by the window; their manners were haughty. The waiter appeared and respectfully greeted them, calling them 'Master this' and 'Master that', as if they were people of nobility or some high-ranking officials.

Zhang Wuji noticed that some of these beggars carried five pouches on their backs, while some others carried six pouches. Apparently, they were some high-ranking disciples of the Beggar Clan.

The waiter took their order and went downstairs. Before he even returned with their wine and dishes, there were six, seven more Beggar Clan's disciples going up the stairs. In a short period of time, the restaurant upstairs were full with more than thirty Beggar Clan disciples; among whom there were three seven-pouch disciples.

Suddenly it dawned on Zhang Wuji that the Beggar Clan was having their assembly today, and the innkeeper misunderstood them as members of the Beggar Clan. With a low voice he said to better get out of here to avoid trouble. The Beggar Clan people in here are not a few."

But right at that moment the waiter came back to serve them a large dish of beef and another dish of roasted whole chicken, plus five catties [1 catty is approximately equal to 1 lb or 0.5kg] of white wine. Xie Xun was very hungry; he had gone through the last few months without any decent meals. Smelling the roasted chicken, his index finger twitched and he said, "We are just quietly eating and drinking; we are not on their way, are we?" While saying that he took the bowl and with 'glug, glug' noise he drank half bowl of the white wine, while saying in his heart, "Heaven have mercy on me. Xie Xun has wandered overseas for more than twenty years, and today is the first time I can taste wine again."

The white wine was actually rather strong, the way people in this area brew; but to him it was like the most refined wine. He took a deep sigh as if he was very content. After drinking one full bowl, he suddenly said in low voice, "Watch out, two people of high skill have just walked in!"

Zhang Wuji also heard footsteps on the stairs, and sure enough, two men with high level of martial art skill went up the stairs. As soon as they appeared on the entrance, a clamoring noise was heard as the beggars stood up simultaneously. Xie Xun made a hand signal, the three of them also stood up. These three actually sat inconspicuously by the wall near the corner, but if they stayed seated when everybody else was standing, they were afraid they would draw some unwanted attention.

Zhang Wuji saw the first man was of medium build and his face looked handsome with a triangular-shaped beard. Dressed in beggar's garments, he looked more like a failed scholar. The man behind him was muscular, with dragon-like whiskers; his face looked ferocious. If he did not have a three-pointed beard, he would look just like Zhou Cang, the warrior holding a broadsword who stood by Guan Gong. These two men were about fifty years of age, their beards had turned grey. On their back there were nine small pouches, which were too small to carry anything, so those pouches were only used to show their rank within the Beggar Clan.

Zhang Wuji mused, "The Beggar Clan is known as the biggest clan in Jianghu. Tai Shifu used to say that in the former days, the Beggar Clan Bangzhu [Clan Leader] Hong Qigong was a righteous hero, with a very profound martial art skill; there wasn't anyone in both orthodox and unorthodox paths who did not admire him. After him were Huang Bangzhu and Yelu Bangzhu, both were people of outstanding characters. But for the last several decades, the people who held leaderships over the Beggar Clan failed to bring the Clan's prestige to its former glory. The current Bangzhu, Shi Huolong, is very seldom making an appearance in Jianghu. I wonder what kind of person he is? These two men bear nine pouches on their backs, so other than the Bangzhu, they

hold the most revered position within the Clan. That day on the Lingshe Island, the Beggar Clan people came to take the Tulong Saber away from Yifu. I wonder if these two have any connection to them?”

The Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword had been stolen by Zhao Min, but the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling were still in Zhang Wuji's pocket. Apparently Zhao Min was afraid that his martial art skill was too strong that even after being poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' he would still possess an extraordinary ability, hence she did not dare to grope around his pocket. Seeing they were among these powerful Beggar Clan people, Zhang Wuji did not dare to be careless; he reached into his pocket, tracing the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling with his hand.

The two nine-pouch elders walked in and sat on the big table in the middle. The crowd of beggars returned to their seats one after another and continued eating and drinking, reaching out to get dishes or raising their bowl to drink the soup. They were as boisterous and uncouth as a pack of wolves.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun strained their ears, trying to hear the conversation between those two nine-pouch elders. Surprisingly, those two elders were only busy eating and drinking; other than saying something like 'Please take another bowl', or 'This beef smells so good', they did not talk about anything in particular.

After those two leader-elders [orig. text long2 tou2 zhang3 lao3 - lit. dragon head elders] finished eating and drinking and went down the stairs, and the crowd of beggars also had their fill of wine and food, they dispersed in random. Xie Xun waited until the last of the beggars had left before he said in low voice, “Wuji, what do you think?”

“With so many of their high ranking members gathered together in this place, I don’t think they simply want to have a party,” Zhang Wuji said. “My guess is, they are going to have another meeting tonight at a secluded place to discuss proper business matters.”

“Must be so,” Xie Xun nodded, “The Beggar Clan has always been the enemy of our Cult. They took part in the burning down of our Brightness Peak, they also sent people to seize my Tulong Saber. We have to investigate clearly to see whether they are planning some sinister plot against our Cult or not.”

Three people went down the stairs towards the counter to pay their bill. The innkeeper was flabbergasted, saying that he would not take their money, no matter what. Zhang Wuji thought, “The Beggar Clan is really showing off their power here, that the inn and restaurant around here are afraid of them; they must be used to eating and drinking without paying, and run amuck without any regard of the law.”

Three people went out to find a small inn where they could spend the night. Although the town was teeming with Beggar Clan people, they usually did not stay at any inn, hence there was a slim chance of them meeting any Beggar Clan people in the inn.

“Wuji,” Xie Xun said, “My eyes cannot see a thing, it is very inconvenient for me to go out spying around. Zhiruo’s martial art skill is not high. If she goes out with you, I am afraid she will be a burden to you, so I am asking you to go alone.”

“Certainly,” Zhang Wuji said. He took a rest for a while in the inn, then left.

He walked along the main street from south to north, but surprisingly did not see a single beggar on the street. Zhang Wuji mused, "It was less than an hour ago they left the restaurant and suddenly not a single beggar is in sight. They couldn't have gone too far."

Immediately he went to a dry goods store nearby. With menacing glance, he reached out over the counter, threatened to strike the shopkeeper while barking, "Hey, shopkeeper! Where did my brethrens go?"

Several shop attendants saw his ferocious and mean appearance; they thought he must be one of those loathsome beggars, they were all scared to death. One of them was braver than the other, he pointed north, and said with a smile, "Your noble clan friends are all heading north. Would you like to drink some tea, Master?"

"I don't drink!" Zhang Wuji barked, "What damn, stinking tea is that?" Turning around he walked to the north in big strides, while laughing hard inside.

He had not walked far from the town when he saw a moving shadow among the tall grass by the road on his left, a Beggar Clan disciple stood up; it looked like he was about to shout some questions. Zhang Wuji quickened his step and was gone in a flash. That beggar rubbed his own eyes, he was so sure he saw somebody, but that person disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Zhang Wuji thought the Beggar Clan set up checkpoints along the way, their meeting must be heavily guarded; therefore, utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] he sped up to the north. He saw the Beggar Clan checkpoints behind trees, among the grass, in between hills and by the rock side; but instead of being obstacles, they became his guide.

Rushing about four, five 'li's, Zhang Wuji saw there were roadblocks at every three steps and checkpoints at every five steps, the security got heavier and heavier. These people's martial art skills were not high, but it was actually not easy to evade their sight under the bright sunny day. In the end Zhang Wuji was forced to leave the main road and continue on the narrow winding back road. Right away he saw a large temple at the end of a mountain passage on the waist of the mountain. He figured that the Beggar Clan people must be having their meeting in that temple. Thereupon he rushed toward the northeast corner, and then bypassing another beggar checkpoint to the west, he went straight to the temple side.

He noticed a plaque at the front of the temple with 'Mi Lei Fo Miao' [Buddha Maitreya Temple] written in large characters. The temple looked majestic and grand. Zhang Wuji mused, "This time the Beggar Clan's important leaders are here in large numbers, it would be difficult to avoid being detected if I mingle among them."

Looking around, he saw a large ancient pine tree on the left of the courtyard in front of the main hall, while to the right there was an old cypress tree. Both trees stood upright and tall, their thick branches and leaves towered over the main hall, both were perfect for a hiding place. Going around the back of the temple, Zhang Wuji leaped up to the roof, and then crawled to the corner of the eaves and lightly jumped to the top of the pine tree. Positioning himself behind a large branch, he peeked outside and silently acclaimed, "Lucky!" because from among the thick leaves, he could see the entire main hall clearly.

He saw that the main hall floor was packed with beggars; he estimated their number to be more than three hundred.

These beggars sat facing the inside of the hall, and nobody seemed to notice him jumping to the pine tree. There were five empty round meditation mats in the hall; apparently they were still waiting for some people to arrive. What was strange, though, that there were three, four hundred people, but not a single sound was heard; it was a totally different situation from the chaotic, boisterous fight over food and wine in the restaurant earlier. Zhang Wuji thought, "The Beggar Clan has enjoyed several hundred years of reputation. Although their prestige is fading lately, the manner of the olden days is not gone. That scene at the restaurant was an ordinary day situation, hence the elders did not rein them the law enforcement is very strict otherwise."

There was a Buddha Maitreya idol sitting in the main hall, its bare chest exposed its big belly, its mouth frozen in an eternal smile, looking so kind and benevolent. Zhang Wuji was still assessing the situation when suddenly someone in the hall was shouting, "'Zhang Bo Longtou' [the leader in charge of the alms bowl (small earthenware bowl used by Buddhist monks to ask for alms)] has arrived!"

The beggars stood up at once. A nine-pouched elder who looked like a scholar with a broken bowl in his hands, slowly walked in and stood on the right side.

Another shout was heard, "'Zhang Bang Longtou' [the leader in charge of the (beggar) stick] has arrived!"

The nine-pouched elder who looked like Zhou Cang, lifting an iron stick high in his hands, walked in big strides, and stood on the left side.

That man shouted again, "Zhi Fa Zhaglao' [law enforcement elder] has arrived!"

A thin and small old beggar walked in, his hand holding a worn-out bamboo mat. His steps were light and he walked without raising a single speck of dust. Zhang Wuji thought, "This man's 'qing gong' is excellent; perhaps he is only a notch below Wei Fuwang [bat king Wei]."

Another shout was heard, "'Chuan Gong Zhanglao' [instructor/teacher/coach (someone who passes on skills) elder] has arrived!"

This time an old beggar with white hair and white beard appeared. He was empty handed, and his level of martial art skill could not be evaluated from either his stature or his footwork.

The four elders occupied the four meditation mats, but the mat in the middle was still empty. They all bowed down and shouted in one voice, "Inviting Bangzhu [clan leader] to preside!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "I heard the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu is called the 'Jin Yin Zhang' [Gold and Silver Palm], Shi Huolong [his given name means 'fiery dragon']," he mused, "But in the Wulin world, very few people have ever seen his real face. I wonder what kind of character is he?"

In the main hall, all the beggars bowed down together. A moment later, the sound of footsteps was heard from behind the screen, and a large man walked in big strides. He was more than six feet tall, looked healthy and strong, with a red face like a high-ranking government officer. He stopped at the middle of the main hall and stood with his hands on his waist.

The crowd of beggars chorused, "The disciples in attendance pay their respect to Bangzhu."

The Beggar Clan's Bangzhu Shi Huolong waved his right hand and said, "That's enough! You boys are well?"

"We wish Bangzhu well," the crowd chorused. They waited until Shi Huolong took his seat on the middle meditation mat before they all sat down.

Shi Huolong turned toward Zhang Bo Longtou and said, "Weng Xiongdi [brother Weng], please tell everybody here about Jin Mao Shi Wang and the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji's heart beat faster when he heard the name Jin Mao Shi Wang and the Tulong Saber being mentioned, he focused his attention to listen attentively.

Zhang Bo Longtou stood up, bowed to the Clan Leader, and then turned around and said, "Brethrens, the Devil Cult has been in enmity with our Clan for sixty years, the grievance between us is very deep. In the resent years, the Ming Cult has set up a new Cult Leader, by the name of Zhang Wuji. From our members who were involved in the besieging of the Brightness Peak, we learned that this man is an ignorant youngster. A child who is still wet behind the ears, whose yellow feathers have not been shed; which important achievement can he accomplish? How can he resist our Clan's Shi Bangzhu's heroism, ability and great accomplishments?"

The crowd of beggars broke into thunderous cheers and applause, while Shi Huolong's face looked pleased and proud.

Zhang Bo Longtou continued, "Only, they were originally split up and disunited, and killing each other; the internal strife immediately ceased after the Devil Cult's new Cult

Leader was appointed. This has become a big misfortune to our Clan. Within the last year or so, the Devil Cult leaders are staging numerous rebellions everywhere. In the Huai Si River region, there are Han Shantong and Zhu Yuanzhang; in the Liang Hu [lit. two lakes – Hunan and Hubei provinces], there is Xu Shouhui and his company. They have repeatedly defeated the Yuan soldiers and occupied not a few of places. It can be said that they quite make the grade. If they succeed in this great undertaking by driving out the Tartars, then we are done. Our Clan's tens of thousands brethrens might die without any burial ground at that time."

The crowd of beggars angrily shouted, "Must not let them succeed!" "The Beggar Clan swears to fight to the death with the Devil Cult." "If the Devil Cult rules the world, can our Clan's brethrens live?" "Tartars must go, but there is no way we would let the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu ascend to the throne."

Zhang Wuji contemplated, "Who would have thought that while I was overseas for several months, the brethrens have done really great. The Beggar Clan is this apprehensive; apparently, it was not without any reason. The Beggar Clan people are numerous; there are many heroes and warriors among them; if we can join hands with them to fight the Yuan, then this important matter has a greater chance of success. Question is, how do I eradicate their suspicion, converting an enemy into a friend?"

Zhang Bo Longtou waited until the commotion somewhat subsided before continuing, "Shi Bangzhu has always lived peacefully in the 'Lian Hua Shan Zhuang' [Lotus Villa (a manor on the mountain)], and did not involve in the Jianghu for a long time; but with this kind of urgent matter, he does not have any choice but to preside over it personally. Also, with the Heaven's blessing, our Clan's eight-pouch Zhanglao [elder] Chen Youliang has made an acquaintance with a

Wudang disciple and has obtained extremely important information.” Raising his voice he called out, “Chen Zhanglao!”

“Here!” a voice from behind the wall responded.

Two men appeared, walking hand-in-hand. One of them was about thirty years of age, with a swift and fierce expression; he was none other than Chen Youliang whose life was spared by Xie Xun on the Lingshe Island. The other was a 27, 28 year-old handsome man; he was none other than Song Yuanqiao’s son, Song Qingshu.

When he heard ‘Chen Youliang has made an acquaintance with a Wudang disciple’, Zhang Wuji assumed it was some ordinary disciple under his martial uncles; who would have thought that it was a Wudang’s disciple who could be regarded as the first among the third generation disciples? “How can Song Shige [martial (older) brother] get mixed up with the Beggar Clan?” he thought. Following which, he thought, “Wudang Pai and the Beggar Clan are both chivalrous organizations, they have a good relationship with each other, so I should not wonder.”

Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu saluted Shi Huolong first, and then they greeted the Chuan Gong Zhanglao and Zhi Fa Zhanglao, Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou, before finally turning to face the crowd of beggars and cupped their fists.

“Chen Zhanglao,” Zhang Bo Longtou said, “Please tell the details of this matter to the brethrens here.”

Taking Song Qingshu’s hand, Chen Youliang said, “Brothers, this is Song Qingshu, Song Shaoxia [young hero Song], he is Wudang Pai’s Song Yuanqiao, Song Daxia’s [great hero Song]

son. In the future, Wudang Pai's Zhangmen [Sect Leader] position will no doubt fall into his hand. That Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, Zhang Wuji, can be considered Song Shaoxia's Shidi [martial (younger) brother], therefore, I can say with confidence that Song Shaoxia understands the internal matters inside the Devil Cult like the back of his hands. Several months ago, Shong Shaoxia informed me that the Devil Cult's big leader [da mo tou, lit. big devil-head] Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun has arrived on the Lingshe Island of the East China Sea ..."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao interrupted, "The Wulin world has exhausted all efforts in trying to find the Jin Mao Shi Wang, but for dozens of years nobody knows his whereabouts. How did Song Shaoxia suddenly found out? The Old Man here wants to know."

Zhang Wuji had always had this question lingered on his mind, "Zi Shan Long Wang has forced information from Wu Lie, father and daughter, on my Yifu's location before taking him south to the Lingshe Island. This is a top-secret information. How did the Beggar Clan find out and hence send some people to the island to seize the Saber?" Xie Xun and he had discussed this matter over several times, but all along they could not find a plausible answer. Now listening to Zhi Fa Zhanglao's question, he focused his attention even more.

He heard Chen Youliang say, "Due to Bangzhu's good fortune, we struck a coincidence. On the Eastern Sea there is someone by the name of Jin Hua Popo. I don't know how, but she knew Xie Xun's whereabouts. This old granny is highly skilled in maritime and navigational skill. Unexpectedly, she managed to find the desolate island of the far north where Xie Xun lived, and took him to the Lingshe Island. On that Lingshe Island, there were two people, father and daughter, being held captives. Their names were Wu Lie and Wu

Qingying; they are the descendants of Dali's Southern Emperor's school of martial arts. Taking advantage of Jin Hua Popo leaving the island to visit the Central Plains [zhong yuan], they killed the guard and escaped from the island. They met some danger in Shandong area; luckily Song Shaoxia saved them. After talking for some times, Song Shaoxia learned about Jin Mao Shi Wang's whereabouts."

"Hmm, so that's how it is," Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded.

In his heart Zhang Wuji also said, "Hmm, so that's how it is." He further considered, "Wu Lie, father and daughter, are not upright people; in the past, along with Zhu Zhangling, they did a painstaking effort to cheat Yifu's whereabouts from my mouth. But as luck has it, the information was passed on to Zi Shan Long Wang. Speaking about water skill and navigation technique, I am afraid not many people in the world who can surpass Zi Shan Long Wang. If not her, who in the world could have found the Binghuo Island on the boundless North Sea? Even if my father and mother were resurrected from the dead, they might not necessarily be able to do that. It was divine intervention indeed."

Chen Youliang continued, "Xiongdi [brother, referring to himself] and Song Shaoxia have forged a life-and-death friendship. As soon as I learned this information, I coordinated with Ji and Zheng, two eighth-pouch zhanglao, accompanied by five seven-pouch disciples, we went to the Lingshe Island to capture Xie Xun and seize the Tulong Saber to be presented to Bangzhu. Unexpectedly, the Devil Cult also sent a large army of warriors to the Lingshe Island. Although we did our best to fight, in the end we were defeated; Ji Zhanglao and four of the seven-pouch disciples have fallen. On the detail of the battle on the Lingshe Island, I invite Zheng Zhanglao to report to Bangzhu."

The maimed Zheng Zhanglao stood up from among the crowd and narrated the battle between the Beggar Clan and the Ming Cult on the Lingshe Island. He did not say that the Beggar Clan people surrounded the lone Xie Xun, but he mentioned how numerous the Ming Cult people were, and how brave their own people fight the enemy, and finally he told about how Chen Youliang had placed his own life at stake to save him and to uphold justice. He was speaking fervently that his spittle flew everywhere. He said Xie Xun was very impressed with Chen Youliang's uprightness that he did not dare to fight him. As the crowd of beggars in the main hall listened to his story, they were excited, their countenances flushed and they cheered repeatedly.

"Chen Xiongdi is both brave and resourceful, as well as loyal [orig. 'yi4 qi4' - spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood]. A man like him is truly hard to come by," Chuan Gong Zhanglao commented.

Chen Youliang bowed and said, "For the sake of following Bangzhu and Zhanglao's instructions, for the sake of lifting our Clan's principle of righteousness high, I am willing to go through fire or water. It was a trivial matter. I feel unworthy to receive Zheng Zhanglao's compliments."

Seeing his modesty and unwillingness to receive credit, the crowd of beggars praised him even more. On top of the tree, the more Zhang Wuji heard, the angrier he was; thinking that this man was despicable and shameless, he unexpectedly dared to go this far. It was obvious that he betrayed a friend to save his own life, but he became the hero who saved his friend instead. Only, his scheme was flawless that even Zheng Zhanglao was deceived. He was indeed a great villain.

Thinking of this, his heart turned sour, "This traitor's deceit, even Yifu was deceived, even I was deceived," he mused, "Only Zi Shan Long Wang and Miss Zhao were not deceived.

Ay ... Miss Zhao is very intelligent; it's a pity her character is ..."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao stood up and coldly said, "Our Clan has this many brothers harmed by the Devil Cult, this blood debt is as deep as the ocean. Are we going to let it go?"

The crowd of beggars responded in such a clamor, "We must avenge Ji Zhanglao!" "Let's go to the Brightness Peak! Wipe out the Devil Cult!" "Slay Zhang Wuji, slay Xie Xun!" "Our Clan cannot coexist with the Devil Cult; we see one of them, we kill one of them, we see a pair of them, we kill a pair of them!" "Bangzhu, quickly issue an order to the Beggar Clan disciples under the heaven to raise our arms and fight the Devil Cult!"

"Bangzhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said to Shi Huolong, "Seeking revenge is an urgent matter, please give us direction on how to proceed."

Shi Huolong frowned and said, "This ... mmm, this is indeed our Clan's important matter. Hmm, hmm ... it needs further consideration. Tell the seven-pouch disciples and under to withdraw momentarily, let us discuss this matter carefully."

"Yes!" Zhi Fa Zhanglao complied. Turning around he shouted, "Hear Bangzhu's order: seven-pouch disciples and under to leave the main hall and wait outside the temple."

The crowd shouted their obedience; they bowed down to Shi Huolong, and went out the temple gate. Only eight-pouch elders and the leaders remained in the main hall.

Chen Youliang moved one step forward, bowed down and said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: this Song Qingshu, Song Xiongdi has rendered a great service to our Clan. I am asking

Bangzhu's benevolence to allow him be a part of our Clan, and to confer to him a position commensurate to his skill and status, so that he would be able to contribute even greater service to our Clan in the future."

"This, apparently, has not ..." Song Qingzhu said. He only said the word 'not' when Chen Youliang cast him a sharp glance. Song Qingshu noticed his expression and immediately lowered his head and did not continue.

"Very well," Shi Huolong said, "Song Qingshu is admitted into our Clan. For the time being, I give him the rank of six-pouch disciple, under the eight-pouch elder Chen Youliang's command. He must abide by our Clan's laws and regulations, doing his utmost for our Clan's benefit. His merit will be rewarded and his crime will be punished."

Song Qingshu's eyes showed resentment, but he strived to restrain himself. Moving forward he knelt down in front of Shi Huolong and said, "Disciple Song Qingshu pays his respect to Bangzhu. Many thanks for Bangzhu's kindness in bestowing the six-pouch disciple position to me." After that, he also paid his respect to the various elders.

"Song Xiongdi," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "Since you are part of our Clan, you are subjected to our Clan's rules and regulations. Someday, even though you become the Wudang Pai Zhang Men [Sect Leader of Wudang Sect], you will still have to follow our Clan's order. Do you understand this?" His manner of speaking was very serious.

"Yes," Song Qingshu replied.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao continued, "Although our Clan and Wudang Pai both follow the same chivalrous way, our approaches are not the same. Since someday the Wudang Sect Leader

position will certainly fall into your hands, why did you want to become part of our Clan? You must answer this question truthfully.”

Song Qingshu cast a sidelong glance toward Chen Youliang before answering, “Chen Zhanglao has shown an utmost benevolence toward me, I admire his conduct very much; therefore, I will be satisfied to follow his leadership.”

Cheng Youliang laughed and said, “There are no outsiders here, I don’t see any problem for you to say it. After the Sect Leader of Emei Pai, Mie jue Shitai passed away, the newly-appointed Sect Leader is a young and good-looking lady by the name of Zhou Zhiruo. This lady and Song Xiongdi are childhood friends; apparently they are betrothed to each other. Who would have thought that the Devil Cult’s big devil-head Zhang Wuji appeared and stole her heart away, and took her overseas? Obviously, Song Xiongdi was furious and came to me for advice. I vow to help my brother taking that Zhou girl back.”

The more Wuji heard it, the angrier he was; thinking in his heart, “This man spoke nonsense; when did such thing ever happen?” He wanted to jump down into the main hall to confront him, but in the end decided to restrain his rage and keep on listening.

Shi Huolong laughed aloud and said, “It’s always hard for a hero to resist a beauty. I am not surprised. One is the Wudang Sect Leader, the other is Emei Sect Leader; not only a match in social position and economic status, but also the man highly skilled, the woman beautiful. This is a perfect match indeed.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked again, “Since Song Xiongdi has this grievance, why don’t you ask Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit.

true/real man – a respectable term to address a Taoist priest] and Song Daxia [great hero Song] to mediate?”

Chen Youliang replied, “Song Xiongdi told me: that little thief Zhang Wuji is Wudang Pai’s Zhang Cuishan’s son. Zhang Sanfeng has always been very fond of Zhang Cuishan. For that reason, Wudang Pai is in a good term with the Devil Cult lately. Zhang Sanfeng and Song Daxia are not willing to offend the Devil Cult. Presently, in the Wulin world of the Central Plains, our Clan is the only one who stands against the Devil Cult; furthermore, we are the only one who has enough power to resist those devils.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded. “That’s true,” he said, “Only by destroying the Devil Cult and slaughtering that fellow Zhang Wuji Song Xiongdi’s desire will be satisfied and his grievance compensated only by destroying the Devil Cult and slaughtering that person Zhang Wuji.”

From his hiding place on the tree, Zhang Wuji recalled how in the Western Region’s desert and on the Brightness Peak, Song Qingshu’s treatment toward Zhou Zhiruo had always been rather strange. Only now did Zhang Wuji realize that Song Qingshu had a deep feeling toward her. Yet he was still astonished over what had happened, “A Wudang disciple wants to join the Beggar Clan; this is not right, especially without reporting to Tai Shifu and Song Shibo [martial (older) uncle] first. He is betraying his own school, betraying his own father, for a woman’s sake; wouldn’t he make a very big mistake? Besides, Zhiruo loves me very much, although Song Qingshu received the Beggar Clan’s help, how can he force her to follow him? Song Dage [big brother Song] has made a name for himself in the Jianghu, he holds the reputation as the up-and coming leader of Wudang Pai. How can he make such a blunder?”

He heard Chen Youliang say, "Reporting to Bangzhu: in Dadou [grand capital, modern day Beijing] disciple has captured an important figure from the Devil Cult. This man might be crucial to our Clan's great endeavor; asking Bangzhu to give your verdict."

Shi Huolong was delighted, "Bring him in," he said.

Chen Youliang clapped three times, "Bring that devil head in," he said.

From the back of the hall came four beggars with unsheathed weapons in their hands, dragging a man whose hands were tied behind his back. Zhang Wuji saw that he was a young man in his early twenties; his face looked very familiar. He remembered he had seen this man during the Ming Cult great assembly on the Butterfly Valley, but he did not remember that man's name. That man looked furious; when he walked passed Chen Youliang, he suddenly spat on his face. Chen Youliang quickly dodged while striking that man's cheek with the back of his palm, causing that man's cheek to immediately swell.

The beggar behind him pushed him down and shouted, "Kneel down and kowtow in Bangzhu's presence!"

That man coughed and spat thick spittle toward Shi Huolong's face.

The distance between that man and Shi Huolong was very close, to begin with, plus, he spat with all his might. Although Shi Huolong hastily ducked, he was not able to evade. 'Splat!' the spittle landed on his forehead.

Chen Youliang's leg swept away and kicked that man down, while he blocked in front of Shi Huolong. Pointing his finger

to him, Chen Youliang barked, "Daring crazy disciple! Are you bored of your life?"

That man shot back, "Since I have fallen into your hand, your master does not hope to go home alive!"

As Chen Youliang blocked, Shi Huolong had the opportunity to wipe the spittle from his forehead. Chen Youliang moved two steps backward and said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: this fellow is a top ranking expert within the Devil Cult; his martial art skill level appears to be above the four Protector Kings. We must not look down on him."

Listening to him, Zhang Wuji was astonished, but he immediately understood; Chen Youliang was deliberately exaggerating that man's martial art to give face to his Clan Leader. Shi Huolong was the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, but surprisingly he was not able to evade this spittle attack, which was highly unlikely. Furthermore, after receiving such insult, his face did not show any indignation, but he appeared to be somewhat frightened and was at a loss.

"Chen Xiongdi," Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked, "Who is this man?"
"His name is Han Lin'er," Chen Youliang replied, "The son of Han Shantong."

Zhang Wuji nodded his head silently, "That's right. During the general assembly in the Butterfly Valley, he was always following his father around and did not speak to me at all, no wonder I did not remember his name."

"Ah," Zhi Fa Zhanglao was delighted, "He is Han Shantong's son. Chen Xiongdi, your contribution is even greater. Reporting to Bangzhu: for the past several years, Han Shantong has repeatedly defeated the Yuan army, establishing for himself a great fame for his military prowess.

The generals under his command, Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, and the others, are all important leaders within the Devil Cult. By capturing this fellow, we can use him as hostage, so that we won't have to worry about Han Shantong not listening to our Clan."

Han Lin'er opened his mouth in swearing and cursing, "In your mother's dream! What kind of hero is my Father? How could he submit to your shameless coercing? My Father only listen to Zhang Jiaozhu's order. Your Beggar Clan wants to contend for supremacy against my Ming Cult? You are overestimating your own capabilities too much! Your stinky Beggar Clan Bangzhu is not even fit to carry our Zhang Jiaozhu."

Chen Youliang chuckled, "Han Xiongdi," he said, "You say your Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu is such a hero, all of us admire him very much and want to see his face. Why don't you take us to see him?"

"Zhang Jiaozhu is dealing with important matters," Han Lin'er said, "Even our own brethrens cannot easily see him. How can he have time to see you?" [Translator's note: in this exchange, both Chen Youliang and Han Lin'er referred to Zhang Wuji as 'lao ren jia' - Senior, a polite term for someone of higher status or simply older.]

Chen Youliang laughed, "Everybody in Jianghu said that Zhang Wuji has been captured by the Yuan army and has been beheaded at Dadou a while ago that his leadership in all levels has been taken over in various regions, yet you are still blowing your horn?"

"Pei!" Han Lin'er spat angrily, "Bullshit! Can Tartars capture our Zhang Jiaozhu? Even if he is surrounded by a thousand soldiers and ten thousands horses, our Jiaozhu can come and

go as he wishes. It is true that Zhang Jiaozhu has gone to Dadou, but he went there to rescue the Wulin characters of the Six Major Sects. What beheading? You are but sprouting nonsense!"

Chen Youliang was not angered, still chuckling he said, "That was what I heard from the Jianghu, it's hard for me not to believe. Why else would in the past half a year or so we only heard about Han Shantong, Xu Shouhui, and some Zhu Yuanzhang, Peng Yingyu Heshang [Buddhist monk], but we have never heard about Zhang Wuji? Surely it is because he is dead. I have no doubt about it."

Han Lin'er's face turned completely red, the blue vein on his forehead bulged out. "My Father, Xu Shouhui and the others are executing Zhang Jiaozhu's command; how can they be compared with Zhang Jiaozhu?"

Chen Youliang incredulously said, "This man Zhang Wuji's martial art skill cannot be considered bad, but he was destined not to live a long life and will die young. Somebody who has done some divination on him says that he won't live past the beginning of this year ..."

Right at this moment, suddenly a branch of the old cypress tree in the courtyard was shaking lightly, but nobody in the main hall knew about it. Zhang Wuji, however, was able to hear a faint excited breathing noise from behind the branch, but that person immediately controlled his breath that the noise stopped.

"Turn out there is someone hiding on that old cypress tree," Zhang Wuji thought, "This person must be here before I did. How come I am not aware of his presence for this long? His martial art skill must be not bad." Focusing his eyes, he saw a shadow among the branches and the leaves. He saw the

corner of that person's green clothes; he knew that person was well prepared, his outfit blended very well with the color of the cypress tree. If not for Zhang Wuji's astute vision, he would have had a difficult time seeing that person.

He heard Han Lin'er angrily said, "Zhang Jiaozhu has a big heart with a generous nature, the Heaven will most certainly bless him. He is still very young and I will not be surprised if he will live another hundred years.

Chen Youliang gasped and said, "But a man's fate is hard to predict! I heard that he was framed by a traitor and thus was captured and executed by the imperial government. I don't find that as a strange occurrence. People who have seen Zhang Wuji all said that he would not live past three times eight, twenty-four years of age ..."

Suddenly from the old cypress tree a green shadow flashed, someone jumped down and shouted, "Zhang Wuji is here! Who cursed me as a short-lived man?" The voice still lingered in the air, the person had already entered the main hall.

Zhang Bang Zhaglao, who was standing at the door, stretched out his hand to grab the back of that person's neck, trying to capture him. With a swift and nimble movement, that person evaded to the side. Now everyone could see that he was wearing a green robe with a rectangular headband, his manner was elegant, his face was like a jade, and his eyes were as clear as water. He was none other than Zhao Min wearing a man's clothes.

As he saw Zhao Min made an appearance, Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken; he was startled and angered at the same time, but also felt sweetness and delight in his heart, so that he could not refrain from softly exclaiming. By this time, all the beggars in the main hall had already surrounded Zhao Min,

hence nobody paid any attention to his exclamation.

The Beggar Clan people had never seen Zhang Wuji, they only knew that the Ming Cult's Cult Leader was a young man around twenty years of age with a superb martial art skill. Seeing Zhao Min's swiftness and agility in evading Zhang Bang Zhanglao's grab, they knew this person was a top quality martial art expert, hence they all believe the Ming Cult's Cult Leader had arrived, everybody shivered in fear.

Only Chen Youliang noticed that his face was too pretty, he looked too young, and there was a rather flirtatious tone in his voice. All in all, there was a difference with this man's appearance and the description of Zhang Wuji in the Jianghu. He shouted, "Zhang Wuji has been dead long ago, where did this impostor come from?"

Zhao Min indignantly said, "Zhang Wuji is alive and well, why did you keep cursing him as dead? Zhang Wuji is flooded with good fortune as vast as the sky, he will live a long life of over-a-hundred-years; he will live another eighty years even after everybody in here is dead."

Zhang Wuji could hear the sadness in these few sentences; it was as if after abandoning them on that desolate island, she was pricked by her own conscience. But then he thought, "How can this kind of cruel and mean person have any conscience? Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji, you simply are not willing to part with her. You are simply deceiving yourself with this kind of wishful thinking."

"Who are you, actually?" Chen Youliang asked.

Zhao Min replied, "I am the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, Zhang Wuji. Why do you hold my subordinate brother captive? Release him quickly. Whatever problem you have, I am here to deal

with you personally.”

“Huh, huh!” suddenly someone from the side sneered, “Miss Zhao, others may not recognize you; do you think I, Song Qingshu, don’t know you? Reporting to Bangzhu: this woman is the Ruyang Prince’s daughter, she has many martial art experts under her command, we must guard against them.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao pursed his lips and whistled loudly, “Zhang Bang Zhanglao, take our brothers go out the temple to seek the enemy. Watch for enemies coming in to attack,” he ordered.

Zhang Bang Zhanglao responded and went out the hall. In an instant from every direction came shouts and whistles from the Beggar Clan disciples. Seeing this situation, Zhao Min’s countenance changed slightly, she clapped her hands once, and from the top of the wall two men jumped down; they were the Xuanming Er Lao [Xuanming ‘two’ Elders], Lu Zhangke and He Biweng.

“Get them!” Zhi Fa Zhanglao barked his order. Immediately four seven-pouch disciples pounced on Lu and He, two elders.

Xuanming Elders’ martial arts were exceptionally strong, in just three stances all four seven-pouch disciples were injured. The white-haired, white-bearded Chuan Gong Zhanglao stood up. With a loud shout his palm struck straight to He Biweng, creating a loud gust of wind, a sign of overwhelming power behind that strike.

He Biweng used his ‘Xuan Ming Shen Zhang’ [mysterious and dark divine palm] to parry the attack. With a loud ‘Bang!’ two palms collided. Three palms exchanges later, it was evident that Chuan Gong Zhanglao was not He Biweng’s match.

On the other front, Lu Zhangke, with the deer antler staff in his hand, fought Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Zhang Bo Longtou, two people. For the time being, it was hard to decide which side had the upper hand.

Seeing Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face was flushed as red as blood, while retreating step-by-step, Zhang Bang Longtou could not help from feeling alarmed. He knew Chuan Gong Zhanglao's profound power, which could be considered as their Clan's number one martial art expert; how could he not be able to match this old man? By the fifth palm exchange, he saw Chuan Gong Zhanglao was gasping for breath, his white beard fluttered in the air; it was clear that he was in distress. Although he knew Chuan Gong Zhanglao had never liked to be helped in fight, seeing his dire condition, in the end Zhang Bang Longtou could not let him lose his life under the enemy's hand; Zhang Bang Longtou swept He Biweng's feet using his iron staff.

As the Xuanming Elders appeared, Zhao Min was about to retreat, but Chen Youliang blocked her way with a sword. In the Wan An Temple, Zhao Min had learned the essence of the Six Major Sects' martial art skill. With 'shua, shua, shua'sounds her sword moved. The first stance was Huashan's sword technique, the second was Kunlun's, and the last one was Kongtong's. For the fourth stance, she used the Emei Pai's 'jin ding jiu shi' [golden peak nine styles].

Chen Youliang was taken by surprise and was not able to fend off. Zhao Min's sword made a circle and stabbed straight toward his chest. 'Clang!' a sword was thrust horizontally from the left, diverting Zhao Min's sword; it was Song Qingshu.

While the battle was raging all over the main hall, Zhang Wuji watched from the top of the pine tree. He saw Song

Qingshu was able to fully utilize the Wudang sword technique. His movements were steady and fierce; apparently he had mastered the lessons imparted by his father, Song Yuanqiao. Chen Youliang also attacked from the side. Although Zhao Min possessed a vast knowledge of sword techniques, in the end diversity could not overcome purity. With one against two, already she was forced to defend herself more and attack less.

Zhang Wuji was secretly anxious, but also puzzled, "Why does she use an ordinary sword? If it was Yitian Sword, she would be able to cut her opponents' swords and break through their siege." He noticed that she was wearing tight clothes, showing off her slim figure; it was obvious that she was not concealing the Yitian Sword on her waist. After feeling anxious for a while, Zhang Wuji rebuked himself, "Zhang Wuji, this little witch killed your cousin; why are you anxious over her safety instead? You not only offend Biaomei [younger female cousin], but offend Yifu and Zhiruo as well."

After fighting for a while, several more martial art masters from the Beggar Clan joined the battle, while on Zhao Min's side no other people came in to help. Realizing the unfavorable situation, Lu Zhangke called out, "Jun Zhu Niang-niang [princess], Shi Di [martial (younger) brother], let's retreat to the courtyard and find an opportunity to leave."

"Very well," Miss Zhao said, "This man surnamed Chen slanders Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang], saying he is short-lived and will die young. I am mad at him; you two deal with him well."

"Will do," Xuanming Elders replied, "Junzhu, please leave first. Leave this kid to us."

Zhao Min also said, "That Han Lin'er is very loyal to Zhang Gongzi, you must try to save him."

"Junzhu, please withdraw first," Lu Zhangke said, "Leave the rescuing business to us, two brothers." These three people were talking about rescuing people while under the siege of powerful enemies, as if they did not have any regard toward their opponents.

While the battle in the main hall was raging wild, the Beggar Clan's Clan Leader Shi Huolong was standing quietly on the corner of the main hall. As Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two Elders listened to Zhao Min's exchange with the Xuanming Elders, they ordered their people to intercept. Suddenly both Lu Zhangke and He Biweng left their opponents and charged toward Shi Huolong. Their movement was so fast that it was impossible for Shi Huolong to resist. Who would have thought that as Chen Youliang listened to Zhao Min and the Xuanming Elders planning their escape, he had already anticipated this tactic? He preceded everybody else by going around and was ready by Shi Huolong's side.

Before the Xuanming Elders' palm strikes arrived, Chen Youliang had already pushed Shi Huolong's shoulder down, and shoved him behind the Mi Le Fo image. 'Crack!' as the Xuanming Elders palms struck down, part of the idol broke with its debris flew everywhere, while the idol itself was swaying, ready to fall down. He Biweng moved another step forward and struck two more times with his palms. The large idol flew to the air and crashed down.

The crowd of beggars cried out in alarm and leaped away to evade. Zhao Min took advantage of this highly chaotic situation to leap out to the courtyard. Song Qingshu and Zhang Bang Longtou, one with a sword the other a staff, pursued together. As she was leaping over the temple gate,

three staves suddenly appeared lightning fast to sweep the lower part of Zhao Min's body. Zhao Min was already busy blocking Song Qingshu's sword and Zhang Bang Longtou's iron staff, now she had to evade these three incoming attacks. She managed to avoid two, but failed to evade the third. She felt pain on her left shin as a staff struck her, her feet faltered and she fell down forward. Song Qingshu flipped his sword to strike the back of Zhao Min's head with the handle, with the intention of knocking her down and capture her alive.

As the sword hilt was only less than half a foot away from her head, suddenly the iron staff in Zhang Bang Longtou's hand flicked the sword hilt up, diverting Song Qingshu's sword to the side. Right at that moment a shadow flew up and leaped over the wall.

Song Qingshu turned around and asked Zhang Bang Longtou, "Why did you let her go?"

Zhang Bang Longtuo was angry, "Why did you pull my iron staff up?"

"It was you who used your staff to divert my sword," Song Qingshu said, "And still ..."

"It's no use arguing," Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, "Let's pursue her!"

Immediately two people leaped over the wall, only to see nearby the corner a seven-pouch disciple was lying down; his leg was broken from the fall that he was unable to crawl back up.

"Where did that witch run away to?" Zhang Bang Longtou asked.

Several seven-pouch disciples who were on guard outside the wall replied, "Nobody was here; we did not see anybody."

Zhang Bang Longtou was angry, "Just a moment ago clearly somebody was leaping over the wall over here. Are you all blind?"

A six-pouch disciple stooped down to help the seven-pouch disciple whose leg was broken, he said, "Just now it was this brother who leaped over the wall, there was no other people."

Zhang Bang Longtou scratched his head and asked that seven-pouch disciple, "Why did you leap over the wall?"

"I ... ," the seven-pouch disciple mumbled indistinctly, "I was grabbed and thrown away. That witch used a weird technique."

Zhang Bang Longtou turned toward Song Qingshu and angrily shouted, "Just now you used your sword handle to pull up my iron staff, why did you do that? You have just joined our Clan, and already you pulled a stunt?"

Song Qingshu was shocked and angered, he said, "Disciple was just going to use the sword hilt to strike down that witch, it was Longtou Dage [big brother Longtou] who used the iron staff to divert my sword hilt, letting that witch escape."

"Ridiculous!" Zhang Bang Longtou roared, "Why would I divert your sword hilt? I have been in our Clan for several decades, and have achieved this high-ranking Zhang Bang Longtou position. Why would I help an outsider? Let me ask you this: why didn't you use the sword blade to stab her but use the sword hilt, pretending to strike her down instead?"

Hmm, hmm ... my old eyes are not blind yet; you cannot deceive me."

Although within the Wudang Pai Song Qingshu was only the third generation young disciple, everybody in Wudang was aware that he was the future Sect Leader, so even Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, and the other martial uncles treated him with respect, and had never uttered even half a sentence of harsh words. He was used to being arrogant. Although he knew Zhang Bang Longtou's position with the Beggar Clan was much higher than his, who had just joined the Clan, he felt he was being wrongly accused in this matter. Not willing to swallow an insult, he immediately retorted, "'Pulling up a stunt', these words were obviously carelessly said. If Longtou Dage wants to accuse me, you must have some people as witnesses. As Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] struck my sword hilt down, it was obvious that you used the staff to block. There are many people in here, I doubt it if nobody saw what had happened."

Hearing his words, Zhang Bang Longtou understood the table was turned; now he was accused of being pulling up a stunt, by letting Zhao Min escape. His anger blazed like a raging fire. "You, a mere kid, are being rude to your elder, are you flaunting Wudang's prestige in your background?" He said that while striking down his staff to smash Song Qingshu's head. Under his violent rage, the staff carried a tremendous amount of force.

Song Qingshu did not yield for even one breath; he lifted up his sword to block. The sword and the staff collided, 'Clang!' sparks flew everywhere. Song Qingshu felt searing pain on his palm.

"Surnamed Song," Zhang Bang Longtou roared, "You dare to defy your superior, did the enemy send you to spy on our

Clan?” While saying this, his staff struck for the second time.

Suddenly somebody rushed out of the temple gate, stretched out a sword to take the staff, followed it down and pushed it away, while saying, “Longtou Dage, please don’t be angry.” This man was none other than the eight-pouch elder Chen Youliang. “Where is that little witch, Zhao Min?” he asked.

Zhang Bang Longtou, still seething with anger, pointed his finger toward Song Qingshu and said, “He let her go.”

“No,” Song Qingshu hastily said, “It was Longtou Dage who let her go.”

While the two of them were bickering, the Xuan Ming Elders had already whisked out of the temple. They looked everywhere and did not see Zhao Min, so they figured she had already escaped. Letting out a long laugh, their four palms struck together, immediately several Beggar Clan disciples fell down to the ground. By the time Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others came out, the Xuan Ming Elders, the sound of their long laughs had already dozens of ‘zhang’s away, so even if they wanted to pursue, they would not be able to overtake them.

What really happened was Zhang Wuji saw Song Qingshu flipping his sword to strike Zhao Min’s head. He realized the strike could be light or could be heavy; if it was light, it would knock her unconscious, if it was heavy, it would take her life away. Almost without thinking he jumped down from the ancient pine tree and using the divine skill of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, from behind Zhang Bang Longtou he pushed the iron staff in his hand to divert Song Qingshu’s sword. His mastery of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi had already reached unprecedented level, during the past several months on the desolated island, since he had nothing to do, he researched

and studied the secret Xiao Zhao translated from the Sheng Huo Ling tablets. By integrating these two techniques, his skill was ten times more ingenious than the Persian Three Emissaries' strange martial art. This time he darted out from his hiding place, although Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu were such martial art masters, they were incapable to detect his movement. Zhang Bang Longtou only knew Song Qingshu strike his iron staff, while Song Qingshu clearly see Zhang Bang Longtou stretch out his staff to divert his sword.

Taking advantage while those two people were startled, his left hand reached behind him to grab a seven-pouch disciple and toss him over the wall. Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu saw someone was leaping over the wall, they assumed it was Zhao Min escaping, so both of them pursued out. Zhang Wuji grabbed Zhao Min and took her to the top of the hall. It was the middle of the day under the sunny sky, so actually, nothing could disappear without anybody else noticing; but as Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu went out the temple gate, the crowd of beggars also noisily swarmed out the gate. Although there were many eyes, apparently nobody paid any attention to whatever was flying above their heads. Besides, as the Mi Le image collapsed in the main hall, dust and debris rose up, filling the air; everybody went out in confusion from the main hall via both front and rear doors. The martial art experts among them were busy besieging the Xuanming Elders, while those with weaker martial art skill were busy protecting themselves. Thus, it was not surprising that nobody knew what was going on.

As she was rescued in a critical condition, Zhao Min felt she was being carried by a pair of strong, powerful arms. She also felt as if they were soaring amidst the cloud or rising above the fog to the top of the main hall. Turning her head around,

under the dazzling sunlight she saw thick eyebrows and handsome eyes, it was Zhang Wuji. Not believing her own eyes, she gasped, "It's you!"

Zhang Wuji reached out to cover her mouth. His eyes scanned on all directions, and saw the front, the back, left and right of the Mi Le Temple were filled with the Beggar Clan disciples. It was not difficult for him if he wanted to escape even with Zhao Min in his arms; but since he knew the Beggar Clan was secretly conspiring to harm his Cult, and Song Shige [martial (older) brother] of Wudang Pai had now joined the Beggar Clan, it would be a pity if he did not investigate clearly and simply withdrew in light of these matters.

He saw Song Qingshu and Zhang Bang Longtou were still quarrelling. Zhang Bang Longtou's eyes revealed an ominous look, moreover, there were some malicious people within the Beggar Clan, Song Qingshu may fall into their treacherous hands. Besides, Han Lin'er was very loyal and devoted, he simply must be rescued.

Seeing the dust and debris were still hanging in the air in the main hall, he thought he might as well enter the hall and find someplace to hide. He darted forward toward the eaves, and then with both feet hooked to the eaves, he slowly pulled his legs and slid down toward the back of the idol from the left side. He saw in the room there were only several Beggar Clan disciples left, they were lying on the floor, groaning because of the injury they suffered when the idol fell down, but Han Lin'er was nowhere to be seen, and he wondered where they took him.

Zhang Wuji scanned around the room, but was not able to find a good hiding place. Zhao Min pointed toward a large leather drum, supported on a large and tall wooden

structure, about a 'zhang' away from the ground, with a large bell on its right flank. Zhang Wuji immediately realized it was a perfect hiding place. Creeping around the wall, he went behind the leather drum. He leaped up and his right-hand forefinger slit horizontally on the leather drum. With a light ripping sound there was a large split on the leather. Bracing his left foot on the beam of the wooden structure, his forefinger slit vertically, making a cross-shaped split on the drum. With Zhao Min in his arms he stepped into the large drum. Although the drum was big, there was not enough room to move with two people inside. Zhao Min leaned on Zhang Wuji, breathing tenderly.

The drum was very old, and inside was filled with dust. Amidst the bad smell of dust and dirt, Zhang Wuji could smell delicate fragrance coming out from Zhao Min's body. His heart was filled with love and hate, his mind was filled with countless words he would like to ask her, but with great difficulty he restrained himself from opening his mouth. He was conscious of Zhao Min's tender body leaning on his bosom, her soft and silky skin lightly rubbed against his face. Suddenly he was startled, "I should not even save her, how can I be this intimate with her in here?" Lifting up his hand, he pushed Zhao Min's head away, not letting her to lean against his shoulder.

In her anger Zhao Min elbowed his chest. Zhang Wuji used his internal energy to rebound the incoming force; Zhao Min felt the pain that she could not help but crying out. Zhang Wuji had already anticipated this, so he reached out to cover her mouth.

In the meantime, he heard Zhi Fa Zhanglao's voice rose up from below, "Reporting to Bangzhu: the enemy has escaped without leaving any trace, subordinate is incompetent and failed to capture them, waiting for Bangzhu's punishment."

"It's all right," Shi Huolong replied, "The enemy's martial art skill is very high, everybody has done his best. Damn it! It's just our bad luck, it has nothing to do with Zhanglao."

"Many thanks, Bangzhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said.

After that, Zhang bang Longtou brought the accusation that Song Qingshu has let the enemy escape. Song Qingshu refuted by explaining his own reasoning. Both sides were insistent on their own version, the main hall was filled with anger.

"Chen Xiongdi," Shi Huolong said, "What is your take on this?"

"Reporting to Bangzhu," Chen Youliang said, "Zhang Bang Longtou is a senior leader of our Clan, so what he said cannot be wrong. But Song Xiongdi joined our Clan in sincerity, that little witch surnamed Zhao is his adversary, so it would not be in his interest to let her escape. In my humble opinion, this witch surnamed Zhao possesses a strange martial art, she is able to borrow strength to fight strength, hence she pushed Longtou Dage's iron staff to divert Song Xiongdi's sword. In confusion, both sides did not realize it and thus this misunderstanding arose."

Zhang Wuji silently praised him, "This Chen Youliang is very good; he did not see what happened, but his guess is 80, 90% correct."

He heard Shi Huolong said, "It makes perfect sense. Both brothers, everybody is doing his best for our Clan's sake, please do not damage the friendship over this minor incident."

Zhang Bang Longtou furiously said, "Even if he ..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Chen Youliang interrupted, "Song Xiongdi, Longtou Dage is a person of good moral standing and reputation, even if he wrongly accused you, you will still benefit from his advice. Quickly apologize to Longtou Dage."

Song Qingshu had no choice but step forward and cup his fists. "Longtou Dage," he said, "Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] has offended you just now, please accept my apology."

That Zhang Bang Longtou was still furious, but he knew he could not lash it out, so he snorted and said, "It's all right!"

Chen Youliang's speech seemingly placed the blame on Song Qingshu, but actually by saying that Zhao Min 'pushed Longtou Dage's iron staff to divert Song Xiongdi's sword', and 'Longtou Dage is a person of good moral standing and reputation, even if he wrongly accused you, you will still benefit from his advice', he placed the blame on Zhang Bang Longtou; all elders of the Beggar Clan understood it clearly. However, Chen Youliang had recently become the Clan Leader's favorite, Shi Huolong always listened to his advice; what else can they say?

"Chen Xiongdi," Shi Huolong said, "The little witch that has caused disturbance just now, is the Ruyang Prince's beloved daughter. The Devil Cult is the imperial household's enemy, then why did that damned witch stand up for that little devil head Zhang Wuji?"

While Chen Youliang hesitated and did not answer, Zhang Bo Longtou said, "I noticed that that Tartar Junzhu was crying with an extremely angry look on her face. When Chen Xiongdi cursed the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, that Tartar Junzhu

looked like someone was cursing her father or brother. It is indeed confusing.”

Song Qingshu said, “Reporting to Bangzhu: Subordinate has some knowledge about this matter.”

“Song Xiongdi, you may speak,” Shi Huolong said.

“Although the Devil Cult is opposing the imperial government, this little witch Junzhu is captivated by Zhang Wuji,” Song Qingshu said, “It seems to me that she wants to marry him very much. Consequently, she is always trying to protect him.”

“Ah!” as the crowd of beggars listen to this, they all exclaimed in surprise.

Inside the gigantic drum, Zhang Wuji also heard it clearly; his heart was thumping madly, but in his mind he had a question, “Is it true? Is it true?”

Zhao Min turned her head around and stared at him. Although the inside of the drum was dim, Zhang Wuji’s acute eyes were able to see that her eyes showed a boundless love. He could not restrain a warm feeling from overflowing his breast. His hands, which were holding her arms, tightened. He felt a strong urge to kiss her cherry lips, but suddenly Yin Li’s tragic death came into his mind; immediately the warm, tender feeling in his heart changed into deep hatred. His right hand grabbed her arm and crushed it. Although he did not use strength, but it was unbearable to Zhao Min nonetheless, so much so that her vision blackened and she almost passed out from the pain, making her want to echo Yin Li’s curse on him, ‘This heartless and short-lived little rascal.’ In the end Zhao Min did her best to control herself not to utter any sound, but big streams of tears flowed down

her cheeks and dropped onto the back of Zhang Wuji's hand, overflowing to the front of his clothes. Zhang Wuji simply hardened his heart and ignored her completely.

He heard Chen Youliang said, "How did you know? Did such a strange thing really happen?"

With hatred in his voice Song Qingshu replied, "This fellow Zhang Wuji's appearance is only so-so, he is not the least bit handsome nor possesses an outstanding ability, but he practices the Devil Cult's sorcery. He is good at captivating women's attractions that many young women are infatuated by him."

"That's right," Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded, "The Devil Cult's lecherous and demonic disciples really did practice this kind of 'flower-picking' [cai3 hua1] method [Translator's note: again, I know I translated this phrase rather literally, but I am sure the readers can appreciate the Jin Yong's imagery], where males and females gather together. Emei Pai's disciple, Ji Xiaofu, also fell under the Devil Cult Yang Xiao's sorcery, in the end she lost her reputation and fell from grace. Zhang Wuji's father, Zhang Cuisan, also fell under the demonic charm of White-browed Eagle King's daughter. That Tartar Junzhu must have fallen under the little devil head's 'flower-picking' incantation and thus lost her chastity to him. The wood has become the boat, the (grain) rice has become (cooked) rice [Translator's note: for those of you who are not familiar with rice, in Chinese, the uncooked, grain rice is called 'mi3', while the cooked rice we eat is called 'fan4']; she is depraved and cannot extricate herself from disgrace." The crowd of beggars nodded their heads in agreement.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was filled with righteous indignation, he said, "This kind of Jianghu's scum, everybody has the right to punish him; otherwise, countless innocent and

respectable young women will be harmed by this pervert little thief."

Shi Huolong stuck out his tongue and licked his lips. "Damn it!" he said with a laugh, "This pervert little thief Zhang Wuji's luck is not bad!"

Zhang Wuji was so angry that his body, from head to toe, shook. So far he was still a virgin, yet from Emei Pai's Miejue Shitai down to these people, for countless times he was cursed as a 'pervert little thief'. He truly suffered injustice and had nowhere to appeal. As for 'Zhao Min lost her chastity to him, the wood has become the boat' and so on, he wondered where did those things come from? Thinking to this point he was suddenly startled, "Miss Zhao and I are in each other arms here, they absolutely must not find out; otherwise they will have a confirmation of their slandering."

He heard Chuan Gong Zhanglao continue, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou Zhiruo has fallen into this pervert thief's hand, whether or not she can protect her chastity, is difficult to say. Song Xiongdi, please don't worry, we will certainly help you recapture your beloved wife; we cannot let the matter of Ji Xiaofu be repeated today."

"What Dage [big brother] said was very true," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "Wudang Pai failed to take Yin Liting under their wings in the past, they are not able to shelter Song Qingshu today. Song Xiongdi invests his life in our Clan; if we fail to protect his interest by helping him accomplish his cherished desire, as the Wudang Pai's future Sect Leader, won't his agreement to become a six-pouch disciple of our Clan be in vain?" The crowd of beggars loudly responded, they all said an oath to kill the pervert thief Zhang Wuji and take Song Qingshu's wife back.

Zhao Min put his mouth next to Zhang Wuji's ears and

whispered, "You are a pervert little thief who deserves to die!" She sounded as if she was angered by them, but also mad at him; as if she was complaining and admiring him at the same time, yet her voice also carried a flirtatious tone. Listening to her, Zhang Wuji's heart was swayed; all of a sudden he was having mixed feelings. He thought in agony, "If only she wasn't this cruel and treacherous, and did not kill my cousin, I would be happy to be with her for the rest of my life; I wouldn't have anything to worry."

He heard Song Qingshu vaguely express his gratitude to the crowd of beggars. Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked again, "How did that pervert little thief charm the Tartar Junzhu? Do you know?"

"As an outsider I don't know the details," Song Qingshu replied, "I know that that little witch led the imperial warriors to the Wudang Mountain to capture my Tai Shifu [grand master], but when she saw that pervert thief's face, she quickly withdrew without a fuss, and the great calamity facing Wudang Pai was thwarted. About twenty years ago my San Shishu [third martial (younger) uncle] Yu Daiyan's limbs were broken by some people, and that little witch presented some medicine to that pervert thief, thus the broken bones were healed."

"That is so," Zhi Fa Zhanglo said, "The Wudang Pai was actually a thorn in the imperial government's eyes, if that Tartar Junzhu was not captivated by the deceitful lust and has forgotten her natural disposition, she would not have presented the medicine as a gift to help the enemy. That being said, although this pervert little thief's conduct was despicable, he still have some good feelings toward Tai Shifu and your various martial uncles."

"Mmm," Song Qingshu said, "I prefer to think that he has not

forgotten his roots.”

Chen Youliang said, “Reporting to Bangzhu: After listening to Song Xiongdi’s explanation, I have an idea which will make that pervert little thief, along with the Devil Cult, from top to bottom, to meekly obey our Clan’s order.”

Shi Huolong happily said, “Chen Xiongdi unexpectedly thought an ingenious plan, please explain it quickly.”

“There are too many eyes and ears in here,” Chen Youliang said, “Even though we are all brothers, I am still afraid someone might leak the secret.”

The murmurs in the main hall immediately stopped; some footsteps were heard, about a dozen or so people went out the hall, leaving only several highest-level leaders of the Beggar Clan.

“This matter is to be treated with the highest confidence,” Chen Youliang said, “Song Xiongdi, both Longtou Dage, let us search around this place to make sure nobody is eavesdropping.”

A couple of rustling noise was heard as Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou were jumping onto the roof, while Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu went inspecting around the hall. They looked behind the idol, behind the curtain, behind the inscribed overhead board, everywhere. Zhang Wuji secretly praised Zhao Min’s resourcefulness, as other than this big drum, there was no other hiding place in the main hall. Four people finished their inspection and returned to the hall.

In a low voice Chen Youliang said, “This matter is highly dependent on Song Xiongdi.”

“Me?” Song Qingshu asked in amazement.

“That’s right,” Chen Youliang said, “Zhang Bo Longtou Dage, please give some ‘wu du shi xin san’ [five-poison losing conscience powder] and have Song Xiongdi take it to Mount Wudang, let him secretly put it into Zhang Zhenren [a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] and various Wudang heroes’ food and drink. We are going to wait at the foot of the mountain. If everything goes well, we are going to capture Zhang Zhenren and various Wudang heroes. Won’t we then be able to coerce and disturb that pervert little thief Zhang Wuji so that he obeys our Clan?”

Shi Huolong was first to applaud and called out, “Marvelous, marvelous!”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao also said, “This plan is not bad. Our Clan’s ‘wu du shi xin san’ is very fierce, but if we want to put the poison on Zhang Wuji’s food and drink, I am afraid the Devil Cult guard on him is too tight, so it is very unlikely for us to succeed. Song Xiongdi is a Wudang disciple, so if we want to capture Wudang people, it will be like guarding against the thief who is already in the house, truly inconspicuous, a very cunning strategy, it will be very easy.”

“This ... this ...” Song Qingshu haltingly said, “It means I will have to poison my own father, absolutely impossible.”

Chen Youliang said, “Our Clan’s ‘wu du shi xin san’ is very effective to lose someone’s consciousness, but it is totally harmless to the body. Your honorable father, Song Daxia [great hero Song] is a righteous hero, we respect him very much, we certainly will not harm a single strand of his hair.”

Song Qingshu was still unwilling to comply, he said, “I join

our Clan without asking Tai Shifu and my father's permission first. When they find out in the future, they will certainly hold me accountable; I don't know what the best way to explain this to them would be. However, our Clan has always taken the path of chivalry, no different than Wudang Pai's objective, thus this is not considered a capital crime. But if I am asked to do this unfilial thing, defying my elders, I do not dare to accept."

"Xiongdi," Chen Youliang said, "You have not given this a careful thought. In order to accomplish a great undertaking, we should not be bothered by trivial matters. The people of old sacrificed their loved ones for the sake of great justice, it happened many times in history; let alone our objective is to deal with the Devil Cult. Capturing the various Wudang heroes is nothing more than a way to gain control over that pervert little thief Zhang Wuji. When the Six Major Sects besieged the Devil Cult, didn't Wudang Pai also come in full force?"

"If I do this," Song Qingshu said, "First, my conscience is uneasy. Second, tens of thousands Jianghu people will spit in contempt over me; how can I still have a face to stand on the earth?"

"Do you know why I asked the eight-pouch elders to withdraw from the hall just now?" Chen Youliang asked, "Why did we carefully search from top to bottom, from front to rear? It is exactly because I am afraid somebody might leak the secret. Song Xiongdi, after administering the drug, you also fake losing your consciousness. We will also tie you up along with your Tai Shifu, your honorable father, and your various martial uncles, nobody will suspect you. Other than the seven of us here, who else in this world knows? We will admire you as a hero and a real man who is capable of undertaking an important matter, who would laugh at you?"

Song Qingshu was silent for half a day before haltingly said, "Bangzhu and Chen Dage's [big brother Chen] order, Xiaodi [little brother] really does not dare to disobey. Furthermore, Xiaodi is a new member of our Clan, supposedly must seize every opportunity to obtain a merit; even go through fire or water, I should do it with all my might. Only, a man's life in this world must be based on being filial and righteous; so asking Xiaodi to scheme against my own father, I can't follow this order no matter what."

[Note: previously, Song Qingshu referred to himself as 'Xiongdi' - brother in general term, in this last sentence, he used the term 'Xiaodi' - little/younger brother; denoting a definite change of attitude.]

For the Beggar Clan people the word 'filial' was extremely revered; as the group of beggars heard his last words, they felt it was inappropriate to force him further. But suddenly Chen Youliang laughed coldly and said, "A junior to defy his senior is the big taboo of the Wulin world, I know it, Song Xiongdi does not need to remind me. But I wonder how does Song Xiongdi address Mo Qixia [Seventh Hero Mo]? Is he your senior, or are you his senior?"

Song Qingshu did not answer, after a long while he finally said, "Very well, since Bangzhu and gentlemen give me the order, Xiaodi will comply. But all of you must promise not to endanger my father not even half a part of him, also not to disgrace him in any way. Otherwise, Xiaodi would rather lose my reputation and fall into disgrace than committing this non filial shady business."

Shi Huolong, Chen Youliang and the others were exulted. Chen Youliang said, "That's a great answer. Song Xiongdi can work with us brothers very well. Song Daxia is everybody's

respected senior. Even if Song Xiongdi did not mention it, as his nephews we are going to show him our utmost respect.”

Zhang Wuji felt strange, “Song Shige was always unwilling to comply, but as soon as Chen Youliang mentioned Mo Qishu [seventh (younger) uncle Mo], Song Shige suddenly did not dare to refuse? There must be something fishy here. It seems like, to find out the details, I will have to ask Mo Qishu personally.”

He heard Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Chen Youliang discuss in a whisper about how the Beggar Clan group of warriors was going to go up the mountain after Zhang Sanfeng, Song Yuanqiao and the others were drugged. Each time Chen Youliang proposed something, Shi Huolong would always say, “Very good, wonderful!”

Zhang Bo Longtou said, “Today is still the middle of the winter, the five-poison bugs are still dormant under the surface of the earth, Xiaodi [little brother, referring to himself] must go to the foot of Changbai Mountain [a volcanic mountain in Jilin province] to do some digging. At most in a month, at least twenty days, I will be able to concoct the ‘wu du shi xin san’. The toxicity of the five-poison bugs dug from underneath the ice and snow is not too conspicuous; when it is mixed in the food, it won’t be easily detected. It is the best drug to be used against first-class martial art masters.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, “In that case, Chen Xiongdi and Song Xiongdi better accompany Zhang Bo Longtou to Mount Changbai to get the drug, while the rest of us proceed southward. Within one month, we are going to reconvene in Laohekou [city in Hubei]. Today is the eighth of the twelfth month, let’s set our meeting date to be the eighth of the first month next year.” He also said, “Having Han Lin’er in our

hands is really useful. I am asking Zhang Bang Longtou to guard him well, don't let the Devil Cult take him back. We'd better leave separately to avoid the enemy's detection."

Thereupon, one after another, everybody bid their farewell to the Clan Leader. Zhang Bo Longtou, was the first to leave, heading north along with Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu. A moment later the rest of the beggars left the Mi Le Temple, going their separate ways.

End of Chapter 31 .

Chapter 32 - Ignorant Grievance, Vain Anxiety, Conceited Desire

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly Zhang Wuji's leg swept horizontally, scattering the snow on the ground toward the Four Heroes. It was one of ancient Persian martial art stances recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling. The Four Heroes of Wudang suddenly felt snow flying into their faces, rendering them blind for an instant, they leaped back immediately.

Zhang Wuji waited until the crowd of beggars had gone far and not the least bit of noise was to be heard in the temple before he leaped out of the big drum. Zhao Min followed behind him, brushing her clothes while looking at him with an expression that is a mixture of happiness and anger on her face.

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji angrily said, “You still have a face to see me?”

“What?” Zhao Min’s countenance dropped, “When did I offend Zhang Jiaozhu?”

It was as if Zhang Wuji’s face was covered with frost as he shouted angrily, “You wanted to steal that Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, I won’t blame you! You abandoned me on that desolate island, I still won’t blame you! But Miss Yin was seriously injured, why did you still treat her ruthlessly? A vicious woman like you is truly rare in the world.” Speaking to this point he was unable to restrain his grief and indignation; moving one step forward, he slapped Zhao Min four times left and right.

Being enshrouded by his overwhelming power, how could Zhao Min evade? ‘Slap, slap, slap, slap,’ both of her cheeks were immediately swollen. Zhao Min was hurt and angered, beads of tears rolled down her cheeks. With a choking voice she said, “You said I stole the Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, who has seen it? Who said I treated Miss Yin ruthlessly? Tell her to come and confront me directly.”

Zhang Wuji was even angrier, “All right!” he shouted, “I’ll send you to the netherworld to confront her directly.” His left hand circled and his right hand hooked across the back of her neck, while he exerted all his strength.

Zhao Min could not breathe, she stretched out her finger to pierce his chest, but her finger felt like a cotton wool, her strength vanished without a trace. In an instant her face turned purple and she passed out.

Remembering Yin Li's enmity, Zhang Wuji was about to strangle her to death, but looking at her face like that, his heart suddenly softened and he relaxed his grip. Zhao Min fell backward. 'Boom!' the back of her head struck the dark green flagstone of the temple's hall.

It was quite some time later that Zhao Min finally regained her consciousness. She saw Zhang Wuji was staring at her with an anxious look on his face. Seeing her opening her eyes, he let out a relieved breath. Zhao Min asked, "Did you say Miss Yin has passed away?"

Zhang Wuji's anger flared again, he snapped, "After you slashed her seventeen, eighteen times, she ... how could she stay alive?"

With a trembling voice Zhao Min said, "Who ... who said I slash her seventeen, eighteen times? It was Miss Zhou, wasn't it?"

"Miss Zhou will not say anything bad about anybody behind their backs," Zhang Wuji said, "She is not her relative, she won't bring a false charge against you."

"Was it Miss Yin, then?" Zhao Min asked.

Almost shouting Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Yin had already been unable to talk early on. There were only five of us on that desolate island; are you saying that Yifu did it? Or I did it? Or perhaps Miss Yin did it to herself? Humph, I know what's in your heart, you were afraid I might marry my

cousin hence you committed this violent treachery. Let me tell you: I don't care whether she is dead or alive, I have already considered her my wife."

Zhao Min hung her head without saying anything. After being silent for half an afternoon, she asked, "How did you return to the Central Plains?"

With a cold laugh Zhang Wuji said, "It was due to your generosity. You sent your navy to pick us up. Fortunately, my Yifu is not gullible and worthless like me; we have seen through your devious scheme. You dispatched some artillery ships to wait for us on the sea to sink our ship. Your plan has failed."

Zhao Min was gently stroking her red, swollen cheek; she looked at him with a shock, but after a moment her eyes gradually showed pity and affection toward him, and she heaved a long sigh.

Zhang Wuji was afraid his own heart would succumb to her beautiful face and her tempting tender affection; he turned his head around to avoid her eyes, stomped his foot and said, "I have made an oath to avenge Biaomei [female younger cousin]. Just consider me weak and worthless that I am not able to do that today. You committed all kinds of evil and there will come a day you will fall into my hand." As he said that, he walked toward the temple gate in big strides.

He had walked away for about a dozen 'zhang's when Zhao Min pursued and called out, "Zhang Wuji, where are you going?"

"What does it have to do with you?" Zhang Wuji replied.

"I want to speak to Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] and Miss

Zhou,” Zhao Min said, “Please take me to see them.”

“My Yifu will act without mercy, aren’t you going to deliver your life away?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min sneered and said, “Your Yifu may be cruel and merciless, but he is not muddle-headed like you. Besides, if Xie Daxia killed me, your Biaomei’s enmity would be avenged, wouldn’t your wish come true?”

“What do you mean I am muddle-headed?” Zhang Wuji asked, “I only don’t want you to see Yifu.”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “Zhang Wuji, you are muddle-headed. In your heart, you really do not want to lose me; you don’t want Xie Daxia to kill me. Am I right, or am I right?”

As his heart’s deepest secret was revealed, Zhang Wuji could not help but blush. “Don’t talk rubbish!” he snapped, “I let you get away with so many unrighteousness without killing you. It would be best if you stay far away from me, or else I would lose control over myself and kill you personally.”

Zhao Min slowly walked near and said, “I must clear something up with Xie Daxia and Miss Zhou; I do not dare to say anything bad behind anybody’s back, I need to talk clearly with them face to face.”

Zhang Wuji was curious, “About what do you want to talk to them?” he asked.

“Naturally you’ll know it when I see them,” Zhao Min said, “I am not afraid to take my chances; are you afraid?”

Zhang Wuji said rather doubtfully, “It is you who wanted to go, I will not save you if my Yifu do not show mercy on you.”

“You don’t have to worry for me,” Zhao Min said.

“Worry for you?” Zhang Wuji was angry, “Humph! I am looking forward to the day you die.”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Kill me, then.”

“Pei,” Zhang Wuji spat, ignoring her remark. He quickly walked toward the town. Zhao Min followed him behind.

As they arrived in town, Zhang Wuji halted his steps, turned around and said, “Miss Zhao, I have given you my promise that I will do three things for you. The first was to find the Tulong Saber for you. We can consider this task accomplished. I still owe you two things. If you see my Yifu, you will certainly die. Please leave. Let me handle those two things for you. It won’t be too late to see my Yifu afterwards.

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, “I know the real reason you do not want to kill me is because you can’t bear to lose me.”

Zhang Wuji angrily said, “Granted, I don’t have a heart to kill you, so what?”

“I am very happy,” Zhao Min replied, “I’ve always wondered if you love me, but now I know.”

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, “Miss Zhao, I beseech you, please leave now.”

Zhao Min shook her head and said, “I definitely must see Xie Daxia.”

Since she was adamant, Zhang Wuji had no choice but

entered the inn and went to Xie Xun's room. He knocked twice on the door and called out, "Yifu!" while he positioned himself in front of Zhao Min.

He called out twice without receiving any answer from inside the room. Zhang Wuji tried to push the door open, but it was actually locked. He felt strange; his Yifu possessed a very keen pair of ears, as soon as he arrived at the door, his Yifu would most certainly be awakened. If he was somewhere else, why was the door bolted from the inside? He pushed the door exerting a little bit more force and 'crack!' the latch broke. The door swung wide open but Xie Xun was not inside. He saw that one of the window panes was half open; he thought his Yifu must have left from the window.

He went to Zhou Zhiruo's room and called out, "Zhiruo!" two times without receiving any answer. Pushing the door open, he also did not see Zhou Zhiruo inside, but her clothes were folded neatly on the 'kang' [heatable brick bed of northern China].

Zhang Wuji was alarmed, "Could it be that they met some enemies?" he mused. He called the innkeeper to inquire, but the innkeeper said he did not see those two people go out, he also did not hear any noise which would suggest there was some dispute or even fighting.

Zhang Wuji was somewhat relieved; he thought, "Most likely they heard some suspicious noise and went out to track down the enemy." He also thought that although Xie Xun's eyes were blind, his martial art skill was strong; it was a rarity to find someone who could be his match in the present age. Besides, he had the cautious and prudent Zhou Zhiruo as his company, so it was unlikely for them to meet any mishap. Leaping out from Xie Xun's window, he looked to all directions without seeing anything unusual, thereupon he

returned to the room.

Zhao Min said, "Why do you look relieved to see that Xie Daxia is not here?"

"Still talking nonsense," Zhang Wuji said, "When did I look relieved?"

Zhao Min smiled, "Can't I see it on your face?" she said, "As you open the door, you were tense, but now the skin on your face is relaxed."

Ignoring her, Zhang Wuji leaned against the 'kang'. With a chuckle Zhao Min sat on a chair and said, "I know you were afraid Xie Daxia might kill me, luckily he is not here so you are saved from a difficult situation. I know you really cannot bear to lose me."

"What if I really cannot bear to lose you?" Zhang Wuji angrily said.

"I am very happy," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji bitterly said, "Then why are you repeatedly trying to harm me? Can you bear to lose me?"

Suddenly Zhao Min blushed, "You are right," she said quietly, "Previously I was determined to kill you, but after the Green Willow Manor incident, if I ever have the intention to harm you, let the Heaven punish and the Earth destroy me, Minmin Timur. After I die, let me perish forever in the eighteenth level of hell, never to be reincarnated for tens of thousands of years."

Listening to her speaking very seriously, Zhang Wuji interrupted, "Then why did you abandon me on that

deserted island for the sake of a sword and a saber?"

"Since you said so, I can't dispute it even if I have a hundred mouths," Zhao Min said, "Let us wait for Xie Daxia and Miss Zhou to come back, so that the four of us can sort things out clearly."

Zhang Wuji said, "Your mouth is full of sweet but insincere words. You have deceived me one person, must you also deceive my Yifu and Miss Zhou?"

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Why are you resigned on being deceived by me? Because in your heart you like me, do you not?"

"What if I do?" Zhang Wuji vehemently said.

"I am very happy," Zhao Min replied. Zhang Wuji saw her talking and laughing as sweet as a flower, moving the hearts of those who watch her. Noticing that her cheeks were still red and swollen from his four heavy slaps earlier, he could not restrain from feeling regret and pity; therefore, he turned his head around to avoid looking at her.

Zhao Min said, "We were delayed in the temple for half a day, I am starving." She called for the innkeeper. Producing a small ingot of gold, she told him to quickly prepare a set of the highest quality dish and wine. The innkeeper repeatedly obeyed, and in an instant he had some fruits and light appetizers delivered to their room, followed by the wine and the main course.

Zhang Wuji said, "Let's wait for Yifu to come back, then we'll eat together."

"My life might be gone as soon as Xia Daxia is back," Zhao

Min said, "I'd rather be a ghost with a full stomach." Zhang Wuji noticed that although she said such a thing, her manner and her face showed confidence. Zhao Min continued, "I still have plenty of gold here, we can always tell the innkeeper to prepare another set of banquet."

Zhang Wuji coldly said, "I do not dare to eat and drink together with you. Who knows when you are going to apply the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'."

Zhao Min's face sank as she heard that, "You don't want to eat, then don't eat," she said, "Otherwise you will be killed by my poison." Without waiting for an answer, she started to eat.

Zhang Wuji called for the kitchen to deliver some flatbread, and then staying as far as possible from her, he sat on the 'kang' to gobble his food.

There was a very sumptuous dish of broiled lamb and roasted chicken, fried beef and chopped fish, on Zhao Min's table. She ate for a while before tears starting to drip on her rice bowl. She managed to control herself and ate some more before she finally put the chopsticks down and she dropped her head on the table, sobbing.

After crying for half a day, she wiped off her tears, apparently she felt better. Looking out the window, she said to herself, "It will be dark in a couple of hours. I wonder how that Han Lin'er is. Once we lost his track, it would not be easy to rescue him."

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "That's right," he said while standing up, "I need to rescue Han Xiongdi first, and then I'll come back."

“Shameless,” Zhao Min said, “Nobody speaks to you, who wants you to interfere?”

Seeing her angry at one time and bashful at another, happy at one time and anxious at another, Zhang Wuji could not help to feel both hatred and affection toward her at the same time; truly he did not know how to deal with her. Hastily he finished the half flatbread in his hand in three mouthfuls, and then went out the door.

“I’ll go with you,” Zhao Min said.

“I don’t want to take you,” Zhang Wuji replied.

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

“You are the murderer of my Biaomei,” Zhang Wuji replied, “How can I be together with an enemy?”

“All right,” Zhao Min said, “Go alone, then!”

Zhang Wuji went out the door, but suddenly he turned around and asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I am going to wait for your Yifu to come back,” Zhao Min said, “I’ll tell him that you are going out to rescue Han Lin’er.”

“My Yifu hates evil people as if they are his personal enemy,” Zhang Wuji said, “How can he spare your life?”

Zhao Min heaved a deep sigh. “Then that is my cruel fate,” she said, “What can I do?”

Zhang Wuji hesitated for a moment before saying, “You’d better avoid him for now, we’ll talk when I come back.”

Zhao Min shook her head, "I don't have any good hiding place."

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji said, "We'll go save Han Lin'er together, and come back here to face him together."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "This time it is you who wants me to accompany you; definitely it is not me who clings for dear life to you and insists on going out with you."

"You are my black star," Zhang Wuji said, "Just consider it my bad luck to bump into you."

Zhao Min gave him one of her captivating smiles, "Wait here for a moment," she said, as she slipped out the door.

Quite some time later, Zhao Min opened the door, now wearing woman's clothing, with mink fur coat and scarlet embroidered garment inside; she looked extremely stunning. Zhang Wuji did not expect she would bring such exquisite and expensive clothing inside her bundle; he thought, "This woman is very shrewd, her actions are beyond anybody's expectations."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Zhao Min asked, "Do these clothes look nice?"

"Face like a peach blossom, heart like a viper," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min burst out in laughter and said, "Many thanks for Zhang Da Jiaozhu's [great cult leader] highest compliment. Zhang Jiaozhu, why don't you change into some nice clothing?"

Zhang Wuji sounded hurt, "I have always been wearing tattered clothes since I was little. If you don't like my ragged attire, you are free not to travel with me."

"Don't be overly sensitive," Zhao Min said, "I only want to see how you look wearing some nice clothes. Wait here, I am going out to buy some clothes. Those beggars must have entered the great wall anyway, with our speed, I am not afraid we cannot overtake them." Without waiting for his answer, she slipped out the door again.

Zhang Wuji sat on the 'kang', while secretly scolding himself for not able to stand firm and letting this girl play with him on her palms. "Obviously, she was my Biaomei's murderer, yet I talked and laughed with her. Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, what kind of man are you? How can you have a face to be the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, in command over all those warriors?"

He waited for a long time and Zhao Min had not returned, the sky gradually turned dark. "Why do I have to wait for her?" he thought, "I'd better go alone to rescue Han Lin'er." But as soon as he had that thought, he remembered something else. What if she returned, bringing all those clothing, and bump into Xie Xun? What if with one slap Xie Xun strikes the top of her head, bursting her skull open and scattering her brains, and she died a violent death? He saw it in his mind clothes and shoes scattered around the room. Thinking about this possibility, he broke into a cold sweat.

He sat down, and stood up, sat down, and stood back up, while letting his imagination run wild, until at last he heard dainty footsteps and delicate fragrance assaulting his nostrils as Zhao Min entered the room with two large packages on her hands.

"What took you so long?" Zhang Wuji said, "No need to

change, let us go pursue the enemy!”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “You have waited this long, what harm does it have to wait a little bit longer just to change you clothes? I have also bought a pair of horses, so we can pursue all night long.” While saying that she untied the packages and produced clothes, shoes and socks. “This is such a small town,” she said, “There is nothing nice to buy. You’ll have to make do with it. Wait till we get back to Dadou [grand capital, modern day Beijing], we’ll buy mink fur coat and some nice clothing.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart turned cold, “Miss Zhao,” he grimly said, “If you think I am after riches and honor by submitting to the royal government, you’d better give up that idea now. I, Zhang Wuji, am a descendant of Han people, even if conferred the title of prince, there is no way that I would surrender to the Mongols.”

Zhao Min sighed and said, “Zhang Da Jiaozhu, look closely, is this Mongolian clothing, or Han clothing?” While saying that she lifted up a set of gray leather-lined garment. As he saw that she had bought Han people’s attire, Zhang Wuji nodded his head. Zhao Min turned around and said, “Look carefully, am I wearing a Mongolian Princess’ attire, or a common Han woman clothing?”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was thumping madly, previously he only noticed that her clothes was exquisite and expensive, he did not pay attention whether it was Mongolian or Han clothing. Now that she mentioned it, he realized that she was dressed up as a Han girl. He saw her cheeks were blushing, while her eyes were moist. Suddenly he understood her heart clearly. “You ... you ...” he stammered.

In a low voice Zhao Min said, “Now that I know you don’t

want to lose me, I don't care about anything else. I don't care about Mongol or Han. You are a Han, I am also a Han. You are a Mongol, I am also a Mongol. In your mind you are always thinking about important matters such as army and country, the difference between Chinese and barbarians, and about their rise and fall, their influence and military prowess. Wuji Gege [big brother Wuji, term of endearment], in my heart I only have one thing: you. I don't care whether you are a good man or a scoundrel [lit. bad egg], to me it doesn't make any difference." [Translator's note: before I offend anybody, the dictionary gives the character 'yi' a definition of 'non-Han people, especially to the east of China, or barbarians.']

Zhang Wuji was touched listening to her expressing her infinitely tender feeling, he was dizzy with confusing thoughts and was dumbfounded for a long time before he finally able to speak, "Did you kill my Biaomei because you were afraid I was going to take her as my wife?"

Zhao Min said, nearly shouting, "I did not kill Miss Yin. You believe me, fine. You don't believe me, fine. I am telling you the truth."

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Miss Zhao," he said, "You love me this much; I am not a piece of wood nor am I a stone, how can I not appreciate it? But why is it that to this very day you are lying to me still?"

Zhao Min said, "I used to think that being intelligent and shrewd, I would gain an upper hand on everything; who would have thought that the things of the world are difficult to predict? Wuji Gege, let us not go out today, you wait for Xie Daxia here, I wait for Miss Zhou in her room."

"Why?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

“Don’t ask me why,” Zhao Min replied, “You don’t have to worry over Han Lin’er, I assure you that we will rescue him alive.” Finished speaking, she whisked out the door, walking toward Zhou Zhiruo’s room, and closed the door.

Zhang Wuji did not immediately understand what she was saying. He sat on the ‘kang’, pondered deeply. Suddenly he a thought came into his mind “Is it possible that she found out that Zhou Zhiruo and I are engaged, and thus feeling that harming my Biaomei one person is not enough, is she thinking to harm Zhou Zhiruo as well? Could it be that after leaving the Mi Le Fo Temple, the Xuanming Elders came to this inn to deal with Yifu and Zhiruo?”

Once he remembered Xuanming Elders, he was panic-stricken. Lu Zhangke and He Biweng were very strong martial art-wise, even if Xie Xun’s eyes were not blind, he might not necessarily be able to fight them one against two. He leaped up and briskly walked toward Zhao Min’s door. “Miss Zhao,” he called out, “Where did your subordinates, the Xuanming Er Lao, go?”

From behind the door Zhao Min replied, “Most likely they thought I managed to escape and withdraw inside the Wall, so they pursue to the south.”

“Are you telling me the truth?” Zhang Wuji asked.

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “Why do you ask? Since you don’t believe what I say...”

Zhang Wuji was at a loss for words; he stared blankly at the door. Zhao Min said, “Supposing that I told you I sent the Xuanming Er Lao to this inn to kill Xie Daxia and your beloved Miss Zhou, would you believe me?”

Her last words had touched the most sensitive spot on Zhang Wuji's mind; immediately his foot flew up to kick the door open. With the veins on his forehead bulging out and a trembling voice he shouted, "You ... you ..."

"Seeing him like that, Zhao Min was scared; she regretted having said such things. "I was just scaring you," she hastily said, "There is no such thing. You must not take it seriously."

Staring hard at her, Zhang Wuji slowly said, "You are not afraid of coming to this inn to see my Yifu. You kept saying that you want to confront them directly. Could it be that it was because you knew they are no longer alive?" While saying that, he moved two steps forward until he was less than three feet away from her. He raised his palm high, ready to strike her to her death.

Looking directly into his eyes, Zhao Min gravely said, "Zhang Wuji, let me tell you this: in the matters on this earth, you cannot rashly believe what other says unless you witness it with your own eyes. Furthermore, you cannot let your own imagination run wild. You want to kill me, fine, just do it. But what if your Yifu comes back? How would you feel then?"

Listening to her reprimand, Zhang Wuji was somewhat ashamed; he said, "As long as my Yifu is safe and sound, I'll consider myself very fortunate. You must not joke about my Yifu's safety and well-being."

Zhao Min nodded. "I shouldn't say those things, I only have myself to blame; you should not feel bad."

Hearing her admitting her own mistake, Zhang Wuji's heart softened. Smiling slightly he said, "I was too rude and rash, and thus offended you." Finished speaking he returned to

Xie Xun's room.

He waited all night, but until dawn neither Xie Xun nor Zhou Zhiruo came back. Zhang Wuji was even more anxious. He took a quick breakfast then had a discussion with Zhao Min about where they would go next. Zhao Min creased her eyebrows and said, "This is really strange. I think we'd better try to overtake Shi Huolong and his company, and think of a way to eavesdrop."

Zhang Wuji nodded. "Let's do it." Immediately they settled their room bills, and left a message with the innkeeper that if Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo return, they were to wait in that inn. The inn helper led a pair of red steeds from the stable.

Zhang Wuji saw that the steeds' hides were smooth and shiny, with long legs and strong bodies, the signs of top quality horses. He could not restrain from clucking his tongue in admiration, thinking that these horses must belong to the people under her command who were trailing the Beggar Clan to this place. She must have fetched them when she went out to buy some clothes the previous day. Zhao Min showed a faint smile as she mounted the horse.

Two riders galloped side by side heading south. To the onlookers, their horses looked like dragons, the two riders, a man and a woman, were wearing exquisite and expensive-looking clothes, their appearances smart and beautiful, they must be a young couple from a rich, high-ranking government official's family who were out travelling.

That day they galloped for more than two hundred 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km], and after spending the night en route, they continued their journey at daybreak the next morning. By midday, they felt the north wind was blowing stronger on their backs, with overcast clouds seemingly hanging over close to their heads. After twenty more 'li's,

big, goose down-like snowflakes started to fall. Along the way, Zhang Wuji did say almost nothing to Zhao Min. Seeing that the snow was getting heavier, he still did not utter a single word from his place in the front. That day, they were actually riding through a remote mountainous path. By nightfall the snow had reached over a foot deep, although their mounts were divine steeds, they could not go further. Zhang Wuji realized the sky was getting darker and darker. He stood on the saddle and looked around, but did not see a single building; he was indecisive.

“Miss Zhao,” he said, “What do you think? I am afraid our horses won’t be able to take it anymore if we hurry along.”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “You only know the horses won’t be able to take it anymore, but you don’t care whether the people will live or die.”

Zhang Wuji was regretful; he thought, “I have Jiu Yang Shen Gong [divine energy from the Nine Yang Manual] in my body, I don’t feel weary or cold. In my eagerness to save people, I am being inconsiderate towards her.”

Traveling a little bit more, he suddenly heard a cracking noise, a roebuck fled from their left, running toward the mountain. “I’ll catch it for our dinner,” Zhang Wuji said.

Leaping down from his saddle, he followed the roebuck trail on the snow, chasing it straight down the mountain. After circling a small hill, under the dim evening fog he saw that roebuck was running straight into a cave. Exerting his strength, he flew like an arrow toward the roebuck, and caught it by the back of its neck before it entered the cave. The roebuck turned its head around trying to bite Zhang Wuji’s wrist. Zhang Wuji exerted all his strength to his fingers and ‘crack’ he snapped the roebuck’s neck.

He noticed that although the cave was not too big, it could easily give shelter to two of them for the night. Carrying the roebuck, he returned to Zhao Min and said, "There is a cave over on that side, let us spend the night here. What do you think?"

Zhao Min nodded, but suddenly she blushed. Raising the reins, she steered the horse toward the cave.

Zhang Wuji led the horses towards the slope and tied them underneath two big pine trees, to protect them from the snow, and then he looked for some dried branches to build a fire on the cave entrance. The cave was clean, with no trace of filthy animal excrement inside. Looking toward the inside, all he could see was impenetrable darkness. Thereupon he skinned the roebuck, washed it with snow, and roasted it on the fire.

Zhao Min took her mink fur coat and spread it on the ground. Under the blazing fire, the cave was as warm as springtime. Zhang Wuji happened to turn his head around. Under the flickering fire light, he saw her pretty face was even more stunning. They looked at each other and smiled; it was as if the hunger and cold of the day melted in that one smile.

When the roebuck was done, each of them ripped the hind leg and ate. Zhang Wuji heaped more firewood to the fire. Leaning against the wall of the cave he said, "Why don't you sleep?" Zhao Min smiled sweetly. Leaning against the opposite wall, she closed her eyes. Zhang Wuji's nose caught an intermittent whiff of fragrance coming from her body. He saw her cheeks were rosy, and he felt a strong urge to kiss her, but he held back the thought and closed his eyes to sleep.

They slept until midnight when suddenly they heard hoof beats from a distance. Zhang Wuji woke up with a start. Cocking his ears he could hear four horses coming from the south running to the north. The snow was still falling heavily outside the cave. He thought, "In the middle of the night, under a heavy snowfall, rushing along braving cold weather, they must have an extremely urgent matter to attend."

The sound hoof beats suddenly stopped as they came near to their place. A moment later the hoof beats started again, surprisingly, the sound turned toward their cave. Zhang Wuji was alarmed, "This cave is remotely located on the back of the mountain, if I did not chase that roebuck, I would not have found this place. How can they find their way over here?" But immediately he realized, "That's right, we left our tracks on the snow. The tracks must still be visible although it has been snowing heavily for half a night."

By now Zhao Min was awake; in a low voice she said, "Perhaps some enemy are coming. Let us hide and see what kind of people they are." As she was saying that, she grabbed some snow outside the cave and quenched out the fire with it.

By that time the sound of hoof beats ceased, but they heard four people walking on the snow toward the cave. In a short while they have come within a dozen 'zhang's away [1 zhang is approximately 10 ft or 3.3 meters] from the cave mouth.

In a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "These four people's movement is very agile, they must be very high skilled martial art masters." If they went out to cave to seek hiding place, they would definitely be detected by these four people. Without argument Zhao Min pulled his hand to enter

further into the cave.

The deeper they went, the narrower the cave became, but surprisingly the cave was very deep. About a 'zhang' later there was a bend on the passageway. Suddenly they heard one of the people outside say, "There is a cave here."

The voice sounded very familiar to Zhang Wuji, since it belonged to his Si Shishu [fourth martial (younger) uncle] Zhang Songxi. While he was pleasantly surprised, the other man said, "The hoof prints and footprints are indeed heading towards this cave." It was Yin Liting.

Zhang Wuji was about to call when Zhao Min reached out to cover his mouth. She whispered in his ear, "It would be very awkward if they saw you and I in this cave together."

Zhang Wuji realized she was right; Zhao Min and he did not do anything shameful, but if the various martial uncles saw a young man and young woman pair sleeping together in a cave, how could they explain? Moreover, Zhao Min was a Mongolian princess who had held Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting, and the others captive at the Wan An Temple, where they were disgraced. It would be extremely awkward if the enemies meet here. He thought, "I'll wait until Zhang Si Shu [fourth (younger) uncle Zhang, Yin Liu Shu [sixth (younger) uncle Yin] and the others leave the cave, and then I'll appear alone and meet them; and thus avoiding this awkward situation."

He heard Yu Lianzhou's voice saying, "Uh! There is a remnant of some firewood in here. Hmm, and some blood-soaked roebuck skin too."

Another voice responded, "My heart has always been disturbed. I hope nothing bad happened to Qidi [seventh (younger) brother]." It was Song Yuanqiao's voice.

Learning that his four martial uncles, Song, Yu, Zhang and Yin, were going out at together to find Mo Shenggu, and hearing from the tone of their voices, Zhang Wuji deduced that his Qi Shishu [seventh martial (younger) uncle] must have met some powerful enemy; he was somewhat anxious.

He heard Zhang Songxi laugh and say, “Da Shige [first martial (older) brother] always takes a good care of Qidi, just like when he was the inexperienced, teenage martial brother; while in fact, for the past few years Mo Qixia [seventh hero Mo] has earned an awe-inspiring fame for his fighting prowess. He has early on surpassed his own former prestige. Even if he met a powerful enemy, Qidi alone would not necessarily be unable to deal with it.”

Yin Liting said, “I do not worry over Qidi as much as I worry over that child Wuji. His whereabouts is unknown. Currently, he is the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. A tall tree invites strong wind. A lot of people want to deal with him. Although his martial art skill is high, he is too naïve, he does not understand the sinister crisis of the Jianghu. I am afraid he might fall into some villain’s wicked scheme.”

Zhang Wuji was touched, thinking that his martial uncles’ kindness to him was very deep; they kept thinking about his safety all the times. Zhao Min put her mouth on his ear and whispered, “I am a villain and at this moment you have fallen into my wicked scheme. Do you know it?”

He heard Song Yuanqiao say, “Qidi is heading north to look for Wuji. Apparently, he has picked up some scents on his whereabouts. Only, the eight-character message he left in a hurry in that Tianjin’s inn is confusing.”

Zhang Songxi said, “A change in our Sect, needs to be taken

care of urgently. [men2 hu4 you3 bian4, ji2 xu1 qing1 li3 – eight characters] Could it be that there is a scum in the community? Could it be that that child Wuji ...” Speaking to this point, he suddenly stopped. His voice was filled with deep anxiety.

Yin Liting said, “This child Wuji is not the kind who would corrupt his own Sect, I am sure of that.”

“I am afraid that little witch Zhao Min is too treacherous for him,” Zhang Songxi said, “Wuji is still too young and hot-blooded; he might be seduced by a pretty face like his father, who in the end brought ruin and shame upon himself ...”

Four men no longer talked; they all sighed deeply. A moment later, Zhang Wuji heard the sound of flint as they lighted the wood to build a fire and cook their meals.

The fire light reached the back of the cave. Although they were hidden behind the bend, Zhang Wuji was still able to see Zhao Min’s face vaguely. Her expression showed resentment and anger; he thought Zhang Songxi’s words earlier must have angered her very much. Zhang Wuji understood her resentment, yet he was also startled, “What Zhang Si Shu [fourth uncle] said is reasonable. My mother did not do anything evil, yet my father was implicated by her actions. This Miss Zhao has killed my Biaomei, disgraced my Tai Shifu [grand master] and my numerous martial uncles. But how can she be compared to my Mama?” Thinking to this point, his heart was thumping madly, he thought, “If they find out Miss Zhao and I are in here, the entire water of the Yellow River would not wash me clean.”

He heard Song Yuanqiao speak with a trembling voice, “Si Di [fourth brother], there is suspicion in my heart, but I feel

uncomfortable to say it out loud. I am afraid I am offending our own deceased Wu Di [fifth (younger) brother].”

Zhang Songxi slowly said, “Is Dage [first brother] afraid that Wuji might suddenly harm Qidi?”

Song Yuanqiao did not answer, but although Zhang Wuji could not see him, he thought that Song Yuanqiao must have nodded his head slowly.

He heard Zhang Songxi continue, “This child Wuji is honest and generous. Reasonably speaking, that is very unlikely. I only worry that Qidi is hot-tempered and acts rudely. He might force Wuji and put him into a difficult position. Add to the fact that little witch Zhao Min is very crafty, she might incite those two against each other. If that happens, then ... then ... Ay, a man’s heart is unfathomable, the matters of this world are difficult to predict. Till from the ancient times, it is difficult for a hero to resist a beautiful face. I only hope Wuji will be able to control his emotions well when facing important matters.”

“Dage, Si Ge,” Yin Liting said, “You are talking empty talk, isn’t that a groundless fear? [lit. the man of Qi fears the sky falling] Qidi might not necessarily face a grave danger.”

“But after seeing the sword Qidi used to carry, I cannot help but feel fearful and apprehensive; I can’t eat and sleep in peace,” Song Yuanqiao said.

“This matter is very unclear,” Yu Lianzhou said, “For people like us, martial arts practitioners, we can’t casually leave our weapon anywhere. Let alone this sword which was given by Shifu. The sword exists the person exists, the sword perished, the person ...” Speaking to this word ‘person’, he suddenly stopped; he could not endure to say the word

'perishes'.

Hearing that Mo Shenggu abandoned the sword given by his master and that his four martial uncles suspected he had something to do with it, Zhang Wuji was very concerned, but he was also angry.

A moment later, he faintly smelled a whiff of aroma coming from inside the cave, mixed with the smell of wild beast. Apparently, the cave was very deep and either at that moment there was a wild beast hiding inside, or the cave was actually some wild beasts' den. He was afraid that Song Yuanqiao and the others might also smell the aroma and investigate and then he would be found out. Without daring to open his mouth, he pulled Zhao Min's hand, quietly taking her deeper into the cave. He stretched out his left hand forward to guard against bumping into some protruding rocks.

They only walked for three steps when they rounded another turn. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's left hand bumped into something soft and smooth; seemingly it was a human body. He was shocked, as if a lightning stroke him, "It doesn't matter whether this person is a friend or foe, as soon as he makes the slightest noise, Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others will know we are here."

Immediately his left hand moved downward to press the five vital acupoints on that person's chest and abdomen, followed by a grab towards that person's wrist. To his surprise, Zhang Wuji felt as if he was touching an ice-cold object. It turned out that person had given up his breath for a long time. Under the very dim light from outside, he focused his eyes to look at that man's face and vaguely recognized this lifeless body as his Qi Shishu [seventh martial uncle] Mo Shenggu. In his shock, without thinking whether Song Yuanqiao and the others might hear him, he

carried the corpse several steps toward the mouth of the cave. Under the brighter fire light, he could see clearly that it was indeed Mo Shenggu. He saw that Mo Shenggu's face was bloodless and his eyes had not been closed yet, as if he was afraid of what he saw before death. Zhang Wuji was shocked and grieved, and stared blankly for a moment.

As he was walking, Song Yuanqiao and the others heard the noise. "There is someone inside!" Yu Lianzhou shouted. Cold rays flashed as the Four Heroes of Wudang unsheathed their swords at the same instant.

Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly. "I am carrying Mo Qi Shu's [seventh uncle Mo] body while hiding in here. I cannot escape the accusation of being his murderer in any way." Recalling how Mo Shenggu had always treated him lovingly, and now he had lost his life in such a miserable state, Zhang Wuji's mind was extremely sorrowful. Within that short period of time, 1,100 thoughts flashed in his mind; he actually did not give any thought on how he was going to defend himself against Song Yuanqiao and the others.

Zhao Min was able to think a lot quicker than Zhang Wuji; brandishing her sword she dashed out toward the exit. 'Swish, swish, swish, swish!' four times, she executed Emei Pai's staking-it-all sword stances toward the Four Heroes of Wudang. While the Four Heroes raised their swords to parry, Zhao Min had already broken through the cave entrance, and leaped on one of the horses the Four Heroes rode. As Song Yuanqiao's sword arrived, she blocked it backhandedly while giving the horse's stomach a good kick. The horse neighed in pain and galloped away.

While Zhao Min was still basking in her successful attempt to escape, suddenly she felt so much pain on her back that she saw stars and was not able to breathe, as Yu Lianzhou

flew and struck his palm down. She heard the Four Heroes of Wudang utilizing their qing-gong [lightness kungfu] to pursue. She thought, "If I can escape farther, he'll have time to get away from the cave. Otherwise, how can we wash away this undeserving injustice? Luckily all these four people are pursuing me, they do not think that there is someone else in the cave." Yet she felt the pain on her chest was unbearable. Stretching the sword behind, she pricked the horse's butt; the horse let out a long neigh and ran even faster.

At first Zhang Wuji was startled to see Zhao Min break through, and then he realized she was luring the tiger out of the mountain to give him a chance to escape. Thereupon he hurriedly went out the cave carrying Mo Shenggu's body. He heard Zhao Min and the Four Heroes of Wudang were heading east; thus he ran to the west.

After running for about two 'li's, he hid the body behind a large rock, before returning to the main road, and then jumped to the top of a big tree. His heart was still beating madly even after a long time. He thought about Mo Shenggu's tragic death and could not restrain his tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Our Wudang Pai has never experienced a disaster like this," he thought, "I wonder who might have killed Qi Shishu? The ribs on his back are broken, obviously he was killed by a palm strength."

About an hour later, he heard three horses coming from the east. By the light reflected from the snow, he could see Song Yuanqiao and Yu Lianzhou each riding a horse, while Yin Liting and Zhang Songxi shared a mount. He heard Yu Lianzhou said, "This witch has eaten my palm. Both the rider and the horse fell into a ravine, I don't think they are going

to live.”

“Only today can we pay back the disgrace of the imprisonment at the Wan An Temple,” Zhang Songxi said, “To think that she was unexpectedly hiding in that cave, human affairs are like a fantasy, totally beyond anybody’s guess.”

“Si Ge [fourth brother],” Yin Liting said, “What do you think she was doing, sneakily being alone in that cave?”

“That is hard to guess,” Zhang Songxi said, “Killing that witch is nothing. We will be really happy if we can find Qidi.”

Four people went farther and farther away, until their voices could not be heard anymore. Zhang Wuji waited until Song Yuanqiao and the others went far before he hastily jumped down the tree and rushed to the east, following the horse hoof prints on the snow. All along, his anxiety was unbearable, he thought, “Although she is crafty, this time she was risking her life to save me. If because of this she met her fate, I ... I ...” He ran faster and faster that in a short moment he had covered four, five ‘li’s until he finally reached the edge of a cliff.

He saw blotches of dark red blood on the snowy ground, with random footprints all around him. There was a large indentation, where a large rock was perched by the edge of the cliff. It seemed like when she reached this place, in her confusion Zhao Min could not see the way, and thus both she and her horse had fallen together into the ravine below.

“Miss Zhao, Miss Zhao!” Zhang Wuji called out. He repeated his call four, five times, but there was no answer. He was even more anxious. Looking down from the edge of the cliff, he saw a deep ravine, but in the dark of the night, he could

not see the bottom. The cliff wall was very steep; there was no place for him to set his feet on.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the edge with his face against the cliff wall, and then slid down. After sliding about three, four 'zhang's, he slipped even faster. Immediately he exerted his strength on his ten fingers, trying to grab the snowy cliff wall, and thus he manages to slow down before coasting down again.

By doing this five, six times, finally he reached the bottom of the ravine. He felt his feet were landing on a soft object. Hastily he leaped sideways. Turned out he was stepping on the horse's belly. He saw Zhao Min was still seated on the saddle, with her hands tightly grabbed the horse's neck. Zhang Wuji reached out to feel her breath, and to his relief he felt a slight breathing, but she was unconscious.

The bottom of the ravine was dark, the winter snow had not yet melted, and the accumulation of snow actually reached his waist. He presumed since Zhao Min was seated on the saddle, the horse took the full brunt of the falling momentum and died from the impact, but Zhao Min's life was saved, she only fainted. Zhang Wuji checked her pulse and found out that although she was heavily injured, her life was not in danger. Thereupon he embraced her in his bosom with their four palms holding each other, and he transmitted his internal energy to treat her internal injury.

Since the injury Zhao Min received was from his own Wudang Sect, treating it was not too difficult. In less than an hour she slowly squirmed and regained her consciousness. Zhang Wuji kept sending out the Jiu Yang energy steadily into her system.

In more than an hour later, the sky gradually brightened.

‘Wah!’ Zhao Min vomited a mouthful of blood. “Are they gone?” she said in a weak voice, “Did they see you?”

Zhang Wuji was very appreciative and grateful that her main concern was whether he could escape the undeserved accusation. “They did not see me,” he said, “You ... you have suffered a lot.” His mouth was speaking, but the stream of energy flowing out did not stop.

Zhao Min closed her eyes. Although her limbs were void of any strength, her chest and abdomen felt very warm and comfortable. After the Jiu Yang energy circled her system several times, she turned her head and smiled. “Take a rest, I feel much better,” she said.

Zhang Wuji’s arms encircled her waist and pressed his right cheek to her left cheek. “You have saved my reputation,” he said, “That is more important than saving my life ten times.”

Zhao Min giggled and said, “I am a treacherous, evil little witch. To me, reputation is nothing; life is more important.”

Right at that moment, they suddenly heard an angry voice from above the cliff, loud and clear, “Damn witch! So you have not died yet. How did you kill Mo Qixia [seventh hero Mo]? Quickly admit it!” It was Yu Lianzhou’s voice.

Zhang Wuji was very shocked; he did not expect his four martial uncles would return. Zhao Min said, “Turn your head around, don’t let them see your face.”

“Thief witch!” Zhang Songxi shouted, “If you don’t answer, we’ll smash you with big rocks!”

Zhao Min looked up and saw Song Yuanqiao and the others, four people, were all holding a big rock in their hands. They only need ready to throw the rocks down, and Zhang Wuji’s

and her own lives would be difficult to protect. She whispered into Zhang Wuji's ear, "Tear off your leather coat, cover your face, and carry me out of here."

Following her instruction, Zhang Wuji tore off a piece of his leather coat and covered his face by tying a knot behind his head; he also pushed down his fur hat on his forehead, until only his pair of eyes was exposed.

The Four Heroes of Wudang had been successful in chasing Zhao Min and forcing her to fall into the ravine, but these four men were veterans of the Jianghu; they were vastly experienced and well-informed. They knew with her honorable position as a princess, she would not wander alone without any bodyguard. Four people pretended they went far away on horsebacks, but after several 'li's, they tied the horses on a tree by the roadside, and then quietly came back. They returned to the cave first and lighted some torches to explore the inside. They saw the carcasses of two 'fragrant deer' [??, xiang1 zhang1 - I don't know what kind of animal this is], which were covered with blood after being bitten by some wild beast, the fragrance from their bodies was still lingering in the air. Four people continued exploring around the cave, and finally found Zhang Wuji's tracks. They followed the tracks and found Mo Shenggu's body, but saw his hands and feet were badly bitten by some wild animals. The Four Heroes' grief and indignation was indescribable; Yin Liting broke out in crying.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Yu Lianzhou said, "This witch Zhao Min's martial art is not weak, but she could not possibly kill Qidi based on her skill alone. Liu Di [sixth (younger) brother), don't be too sad. We will look for all the murderers, and kill them one by one to avenge Qidi's life."

Zhang Songxi said, "Let us wait in hiding around the cave.

Come daybreak, that witch's subordinates might come here looking for her." His thought was usually full of wisdom and strategy, Song Yuanqiao and the others had always listened to his counsel; therefore, suppressing their sadness, they looked for large rocks on either side of the cave and went hiding.

When dawn came and they still did not see anybody looking for Zhao Min, the Four Heroes returned to the cliff where Zhao Min fell to take a look. They faintly heard voices from down below, and when they looked down, they saw a man in brocade clothes was holding Zhao Min in his arms; turned out this witch had not died yet. The Four Heroes wanted to find out the cause of Mo Shenggu's death, hence they did not want to kill these two with the rocks.

This snow covered ravine was shaped like a deep well, with steep cliff all around it. The only way out was a narrow crevice on the northwest corner. Zhang Songxi shouted, "Yuan dogs! Hurry up and climb from that crevice. If you tarry, we'll throw the rocks down."

Zhang Wuji realized his Si Shibo [fourth martial (older) uncle] did not recognize him and thought he was a Mongolian, which was not surprising, considering he was wearing a fancy-looking clothes, also because he was with Zhao Min. But looking around, he did not see any place he could hide; if the Four Heroes threw the rocks down, he might be able to jump and escape, but Zhao Min's life would be difficult to protect. Therefore, his only choice right now was go up and take whatever comes one step at a time. Consequently, he carried Zhao Min and slowly crawled up via the narrow crevice.

He made deliberately made his martial art skill look weak, he would walk several steps, then slipped back down again. It turned out that this narrow crevice was really difficult to

climb, he pretended to be even weaker by loudly gasping for breath and looked to be in a very difficult situation. Within an hour he had fallen down seventeen, eighteen times, before he finally reached the level ground.

Initially he was thinking of running away with Zhao Min as soon as they were out of the snowy valley. He thought relying on his qing gong, although he carried one person, the Four Heroes might still not be able to catch up with him. But Zhang Songxi was very smart, he had already noticed that the way this man climbed up the mountain in a distressed manner was somewhat artificial; he then informed his three martial brothers to spread out on four corners; as soon as Zhang Wuji set his foot on the ground, the tip of four unsheathed swords were less than half a foot from his body.

“Thief Tartar,” Song Yuanqiao hatefully said, “Do you think you can escape alive by covering your face with fur? Who killed Wudang Pai’s Mo Qixia? Quickly tell us! If you lie even for half a word, I am going to cut your Tartar dog’s flesh a thousand slashes, ten thousand pieces; open up your belly and split open your chest.”

Actually, Song Yuanqiao was a calm and composed man, but seeing how Mo Shenggu died in such a wretched way, he could not bear not to use such hateful language; which did not happen too often in the last dozen of years.

Zhao Min sighed and said, “General Yalupuwa, things have come this far, you can just tell them!” And then she whispered in a low voice, “Use the martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling.”

Zhang Wuji did not want to fight his four martial uncles, but looking at their current state, he truly did not have any other way to escape this awkward situation. Thereupon he

gritted his teeth and rolled on the ground, while tossing Zhao Min toward Yin Liting. He shouted and grunted in a hoarse voice while leaping to the air, somersaulting, and stretched out his arm to grab Zhang Songxi. Yin Liting caught Zhao Min without any trouble. He hesitated for a moment before sealing her acupoint and put her down to the ground.

In this very short period of time, Zhang Wuji had unleashed the strange martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling; his fist struck Song Yuanqiao, while his leg kicked Yu Lianzhou. At the same time his head hammered toward Zhang Songxi, while his hand reached backward to snatch the sword in Yin Liting's hand. His movements were as swift as a falcon catching a rabbit, very fast and very strange.

The Four Heroes of Wudang's martial arts were refined and strong, they could be considered as first class fighters of the Wulin world; but facing these successive seven, eight strange attacks, they were thrown into confusion and were forced to defend themselves with difficulty. On the Lingshe Island, although Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was high, he could not hold up against the Persian's Liuyun, three emissaries' martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling. By this moment, he had already mastered the martial art from all six Sheng Huo Ling tablets; his skill was several levels higher compared to the Liuyun, three emissaries, how could the Four Heroes hold up against him?

Actually, the martial arts contained in the Sheng Huo Ling were not the most profound or even intricate martial art techniques, only, they were very strange and unpredictable. If they were fighting one on one under normal circumstance, it would not be a match for Wudang Pai's orthodox martial art based on strong inner power. But Zhang Wuji was using the Jiu Yang Shen Gong as his foundation, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi as the general scheme of his movements, on top of that

he possessed a profound knowledge of Wudang Pai's martial art; stance by stance, form by form, he attacked the weakest point on Four Heroes's defense.

After about twenty stances or so, the Sheng Huo Ling's martial art was getting more and more fantastical. Lying down on the snowy ground, Zhao Min called out, "General Yalupuwa, these Han people are always proud of their own ability; they did not know we, the Mongolians, have inherited this divine wrestling technique, let them taste it today!"

"Use Taiji fist technique for self defense!" Zhang Songxi called out, "This Tartar's fist technique is very strange." Immediately the four people's fist technique changed; they all used the Taiji fist technique to create a watertight defense.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji dropped down and sat on the ground, both of his fists fiercely pounding his own chest. During their entire lifetime, the Four Hero of Wudang had fought countless powerful enemies, and they had encountered countless strange stances. Zhang Wuji's Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi could be regarded as the pinnacle of martial art study, yet not only they had never seen something like this Tartar sitting down on the ground and beating his own chest, they had never heard about it as well.

The Four Heroes were using swords to form a tight defense line with the Taiji Fist technique. This time, with a sudden movement the three swords of Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Songxi were thrust into Zhang Wuji's torso. Yin Liting's sword was snatched by Zhang Wuji earlier, but he had Mo Shenggu's thin saber on his side, which he pulled out and thrust toward Zhang Wuji. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's leg swept horizontally, scattering the snow on the ground

toward the Four Heroes.

It was one of weird martial art stances recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling, which originated from the Old Man of the Mountain, Hassan-i-Sabah. Before founding his Hashhashin Sect, he used to rob and plunder merchants traveling along the Persian desert. Whenever he saw a caravan from the distant, he would sit on the ground and beat his on chest, while crying out to the Heaven. The passing caravan would then stop to inquire. Hassan would suddenly kick the sand toward their eyes, and immediately his long saber would kill dozens of merchants, spilling their blood on the yellow sand, scattering their corpses on the great desert. It was a truly malicious technique.

This time Zhang Wuji kicked the snow, but the efficiency was the same as if he was kicking sand. The Four Heroes of Wudang suddenly felt snow flying into their faces, rendering them blind for an instant. Four people reacted fast by leaping back immediately, but Zhang Wuji moved even faster; he rolled around and grabbed Yu Lianzhou's legs. His hand reached out and sealed three major acupoints on his legs. After that he somersaulted and while his body was still mid-air, his right knee knocked the top of Yin Liting's head, unexpectedly hitting the 'wu chu' [lit. five spots] and 'cheng guang' [lit. light receiver] acupoints on the top of his head. Yin Liting was dazed and fell to the ground.

Song Yuanqiao flew to the rescue, but Zhang Wuji stepped backward and bumped into his chest. Song Yuanqiao could not use his sword, his left hand withdrew the sword and his right palm struck out, but before his palm reached its target, his chest had already been numbed, as both of Zhang Wuji's elbows hit his acupoint.

Zhang Songxi was shocked; in a blink of an eye, from four

people, he was the only one still standing. He realized he was not this man's match, but his martial brothers were in distress, he determined not to escape alone. Raising his sword straight up, 'swish, swish, swish' he thrust it toward Zhang Wuji three times. Zhang Wuji noticed that although he was facing a difficult situation, his steps were unflustered, the sword stance was not in the least chaotic; these three attacks came swiftly and fiercely, but each stance strictly followed Wudang principle.

Zhang Wuji secretly acclaimed, "If I have not learned this strange martial art, resisting four martial uncles' converging attack would have been not an easy matter at all."

Suddenly Zhang Wuji moved his head randomly, swaying back and forth, and making circles. But Zhang Songxi remained unmoved; he was not affected by Zhang Wuji's attempt to distract his attention. With a 'chi' noise his sword was splitting the air, straight toward Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji lowered his head, aiming his skull toward the tip of the incoming sword. Suddenly he dropped to the ground and pounced forward; all acupoints on Zhang Songxi's lower abdomen and left leg were sealed and he fell down to the ground. The acupoints Zhang Wuji sealed could disable only the lower part of Zhang Songxi's limbs; he was about to reach the 'zhongshu' [lit. center or hub] acupoint on Zhang Songxi's back when suddenly Zhang Songxi cried out miserably, his eyes turned white and his upper body convulsed, and then he dropped down stiffly.

Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits. He thought he did not use too much force in sealing the acupoints just now; certainly it was not a deadly attack, it would not even cause any minor injury. Could it be that Si Shibo [fourth martial (older) uncle] suffered an unmentionable illness, and the hit

he suffered just now had caused it to break out? He broke out in cold sweats and hastily reached out to check Zhang Songxi's breath. Suddenly Zhang Songxi's left hand moved and pulled the fur covering his face.

Two people looked at each other in blank dismay. After a long time Zhang Songxi said, "Good Wuji, turns out ... turns out ... it is you. We have treated you with love in vain." His voice broke, his face was full of anger, tears streaming down, but it was unclear whether he was angry or grieved.

It turned out that he realized he was not the enemy's match and thought that he would die without seeing the enemy's face. If the Four Heroes of Wudang were defeated by an unknown enemy, they would die with their eyes still open. Therefore, first he faked death, and then pulled the fur covering the enemy's face.

First of all, Zhang Wuji was naïve, secondly, he cared about his Si Shibo very much, hence he had never guarded against him. At this moment, he felt worse than if he were put to death by the sword; he felt as if his soul had left him, and he was completely dumbfounded. He only stammered, "Si Shibo, it wasn't me, it wasn't me ... Qi Shishu, it wasn't me ... I did not harm him ..."

Zhang Songxi laughed a bitter laugh and said, "Very good, very good. Hurry up and kill us all. Dage, Erge, Liu Di [first brother, second brother and sixth brother, respectively], look clearly: this Tartar dog is not an outsider, he is none other than our beloved child, Wuji." Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and Yin Liting were immobilized; they only stared at Zhang Wuji in disbelief.

Zhang Wuji was completely at a loss; all he could think of was picking up a sword on the ground and slashing his own

neck. Zhao Min suddenly called out, “Zhang Wuji, a real man can endure a momentary injustice; what’s the big deal about it? Nothing in this world can be kept secret forever. You must find the ominous criminal who killed Mo Qixia and avenge his death then the Wudang Heroes’ love to you won’t be in vain.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was stirred; he realized what she said was very reasonable. “What are we going to do now?” he asked, while walking toward her and massaged the acupoints on her back and waist to unseal them.

In a tender and consoling voice Zhao Min said, “Don’t be so sad! You have so many experts within your Ming Cult; I am also not short of warriors with wisdom and ability. With our combined effort, we will capture the real criminal.”

“Zhang Wuji!” Zhang Songxi called out, “If you still have any conscience, just kill us four people. I cannot bear to see you and this wicked witch showing affection to each other.”

Zhang Wuji’s face turned ashen, he had no idea how to respond. Zhao Min said, “We must save Han Lin’er first, then come back to find your Yifu, while investigating the real criminal who killed your Mo Qi Shu along the way, and looking for your Biaomei’s murderer.”

“Wh ... what?” Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise.

Zhao Min coldly said, “Did you kill Mo Qixia? Why do your four martial uncles insist it was you? Did I kill Yin Li? Why do you insist it was me? Don’t tell me you have the right to treat others unjustly and won’t allow others to do the same to you?”

These words were like a thunder in a broad daylight, shaking

Zhang Wuji's eardrums and straight into his heart. At this moment he realized, based on his personal experience that human affairs are often difficult to judge. Deep in his heart, he knew he was a victim of an ignorant grievance; he thought, "Could it be that Miss Zhao, she ... she ... is also going through the same thing that I do? Is she being wronged by others?"

"The acupoints you sealed on your four martial uncles; can they unseal them?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head, "I was using the strange technique from the Sheng Huo Ling; Shibo and Shishu will not be able to unseal the acupoints themselves. But after 24 hours, the sealed acupoints will loosen themselves."

"Hmm," Zhao Min said, "In that case, let us take them to the cave before we leave. You cannot see them again before the real criminal is found."

"There are some wild beasts in that cave," Zhang Wuji said, "They will be ripped badly just like the roebuck and Mo Qi Shu's body."

Zhao Min sighed, "I can see that you are muddle-headed and cannot think straight. If one of them can move his upper body, and he has a sword in his hand, what wild beast can bother them?"

Zhang Wuji could only say, "That's right, that's right." Immediately he carried the Four Heroes of Wudang and set them behind a big rock to shelter them from the wind and the snow. The Four Heroes continuously shot abusive words at him. Zhang Wuji could only keep his mouth shut with tears on his eyes.

Zhao Min said, "The four of you are the Wulin experts, but are completely ignorant. If Mo Qixia was killed by Zhang Wuji, at this time he only needs to pick up a sword and kill you all to shut your mouths; how difficult is that? If he has the heart to kill Mo Qixia, do you think he will not have a heart to harm you, four people? If you keep shouting malicious talks, I, Zhao Min, will give each of you a slap in your face. I am a treacherous wicked witch; I am capable of doing what I say. At the Wan An Temple, it was because I looked at Zhang Gongzi's face that I treated you with respect. I cut the fingers of the experts from Shaolin, Kunlun, Emei, Huashan, and Kongtong, five Sects; but have I ever shown even half of disrespect toward the heroes of Wudang?"

Song Yuanqiao and the others looked at each other. They still believed Zhang Wuji killed Mo Shenggu, but they were afraid Zhao Min would really slap them. Real men could be killed but could not be disgraced; if this little witch did indeed give them a slap in their faces, they would suffer the disgrace for the rest of their lives. Hence, they shut their mouths immediately.

Zhao Min smiled faintly and said to Zhang Wuji, "Go get our mounts to take them to the cave."

Zhang Wuji hesitated before answering, "I can carry them."

Something clicked in Zhao Min's mind; she knew what he was thinking. With a cold laugh she said, "Even if your martial art skill is higher, do you think you can carry four people simultaneously? You are afraid as soon as you are away, I would harm your four martial uncles. You have never believed me. Fine, I'll go get the horses; you stay here to guard them."

Zhang Wuji blushed as what she said was right on target, but he really did not dare to leave the fate of his four martial uncles' lives in the hands of this temperamental, unpredictable girl. He simply said, "I'll be obliged if you'll go get the animals. I will stay here to guard the four martial uncles. How is your injury? Are you sure you can walk without any problem?"

Zhao Min laughed coldly and said, "Even if you were more attentive and had more good intentions, others still don't believe you. You are baring your heart and intestines, other people still think you have a wolf's heart and a dog's lungs." With her speech over, she turned around to fetch the horses.

Zhang Wuji pondered on what she said. It was as if she was speaking about his martial uncles' suspicion towards him, but he also felt that she was speaking about his own suspicion towards her. He turned his gaze to her, and noticed that she was limping; her footsteps were slow and unsteady. Apparently, her injury had made her walk with difficulty. In his heart he took pity on her, also could not bear to let her go like that.

Zhao Min had not walked too far when suddenly they heard rapid hoof beats on the main road, coming from the north. There were three riders: one in the front and two at the back. Zhao Min quickly retreated as she heard the hoof beats. "Some people are coming!" she said.

Zhang Wuji beckoned to her. Zhao Min went to the back of the large rock in a hurry and crouched down next to him. She noticed that half of Yu Lianzhou's body was protruding outside the rock; she pulled him behind the rock.

Yu Lianzhou glowered and barked, "Don't touch me!"

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, "I want to touch you. What are you going to do with me?"

"Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji snapped, "Don't be rude to my Shibo!" Zhao Min stuck out her tongue and made faces toward Yu Lianzhou.

By this time, the horse in the front was not too far away, while the two riders chasing behind him were flying close to him, perhaps about twenty, thirty 'zhang's away from him. As the first rider got closer, in a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "It is Song Qingshu, Song Dage [big brother]!"

"Stop him, quick!" Zhao Min said.

"What for?" Zhang Wuji was surprised.

"Don't ask too much," Zhao Min replied, "Have you forgotten what they said in the Mi Le Temple?"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he picked a chunk of ice from the ground and flicked it out. 'Swish!' the chunk of ice flew straight to the front leg of Song Qingshu's mount. The horse neighed in pain and knelt down to the ground. Song Qingshu leaped up and tried to pull his horse back up, but as the horse fell, it broke its left leg.

Seeing the pursuers were getting closer, Song Qingshu hastily ran to the side. Zhang Wuji flicked another piece of ice and hit the acupoint on his right leg. Zhao Min reached out and successively sealed the Four Heroes' mute acupoints, to stop Song Yuanqiao from calling out.

"Ah!" they heard Song Qingshu cry out and tumble down on the snowy ground. Because of these two hindrances, the two riders quickly overtook him; they were none other than the

Beggar Clan's Chen Youliang and Zhang Bo Longtou.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "The three of them are going to Mount Changbai together to get the necessary poison to make the drug; how come one was running away and the other pursued to this place?" he thought, but then he remembered, "That's right, it must be that Song Dage was pricked by his own conscience and was not willing to do this unfilial and unrighteous thing. Fortunately he came across me, so I can save him."

Chen Youliang and Zhang Bo Longtou dismounted their horses. They only knew that Song Qingshu had been riding the horse for a long time, perhaps he was exhausted, so that when the horse stumbled, Song Qingshu also fell down from his mount. But they also thought that Song Qingshu's martial art was not weak; even if he was injured, his injury must be light. Two people came close with their weapons pointed toward Song Qingshu's body.

Zhang Wuji had prepared another piece of ice in his hand, ready to be flicked toward Chen Youliang. Zhao Min touched his arm and shook his hand. Zhang Wuji turned around to look at her. Zhao Min placed her own left palm on her ear, and then pointed her finger toward Song Qingshu. Her meaning was clear, she wanted to listen to what they were going to say.

"Surnamed Song," they heard Zhang Bo Longtou indignantly said, "You sneaked out in the middle of the night, what is your intention? Are you going to leak our secret by telling your father?" In his hand was a purple-gold eight-trigram [ba gua] saber, which he brandished above Song Qingshu's head, ready to be chopped down.

Hearing the wind the Ba Gua saber produced, Song Yuanqiao was concerned over his beloved son's safety; he

grew exceedingly anxious. Zhang Wuji happened to turn his head around and saw the anxious look on his face, which very soon turned into a pleading look. Zhang Wuji nodded his head, meaning, "Don't worry, I will in no way let Song Dage suffer any harm." While thinking in his heart, "The love parents have for their children is very profound [lit. as high as the sky, as thick as the earth]. Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] is very angry with me; if he could, he would chop me into thousand pieces, yet as he sees Song Dage is facing a danger, he immediately asks me for help. If it was Da Shibo himself who is facing a danger, as a brave warrior, he would never show any weakness by asking somebody else's help." Almost instantly he also thought that Song Qingshu was very fortunate to have people who cherished and showed loving care to him, while he was an orphan without any parents' love.

He heard Song Qingshu reply, "I am not about to tell my Father."

Zhang Bo Longtou said, "Bangzhu [Clan Leader] ordered you to come with me to Mount Changbai to pick some medicine, why are you disobeying the order by leaving?"

"You were also born from your parents," Song Qingshu said, "You want me to harm my own father, how can my heart endure it? I refuse to do this beastly act."

In a stern voice Zhang Bo Longtou said, "You have made up your mind to defy Bangzhu's order, then? Do you know what punishment we impart to those who revolt against the Clan?"

"I am a criminal in this world," Song Qingshu replied, "I do not hope to be alive. In these past few days, as soon as I closed my eyes, I saw Mo Qi Shu come to demand my life.

His ghost does not want to go away, it keeps entangling me. Zhang Bo Longtou, please just chop me dead, I will be very grateful to you.”

Zhang Bo Longtou lifted his Ba Gua Saber high, and shouted, “Very well! I will help you!”

“Longtou Dage,” Chen Youliang stopped him, “If Song Xiongdi is not willing, killing him won’t do us any good. Let’s just let him go.”

“Are you saying we should let him go in just like that?” Zhang Bo Longtou was surprised.

“That’s right,” Chen Youliang said, “He has killed his own martial uncle Mo Shenggu, there will be people from his own Sect who’d kill him. This kind of injustice involves a sinful disciple’s blood, do not defile our chivalrous weapons.”

At the Mi Le Temple, Zhang Wuji had heard Chen Youliang bringing up Mo Shenggu’s name to Song Qingshu, he said something about ‘a junior defying his senior’. At that time, Zhang Wuji suspected that Song Qingshu had offended his martial uncle, but never in his wildest imagination Zhang Wuji would guess that Mo Shenggu died under Song Qingshu’s hands. Although Song Yuanqiao and the others were hidden behind a large rock, they were able to hear Song Qingshu clearly; they were all greatly shocked. Zhao Min was the only one who had guessed about 30% of the story; a smile of disdain appeared on the corners of her mouth.

“Chen Dage,” they heard Song Qingshu’s trembling voice, “You have given me a heavy oath that you will never divulge this secret. How can my father find out as long as you do not say anything?”

Chen Youliang smiled dryly, "You only remember my oath, but you don't remember your own even heavier one. You said that from that day forward, you would obey what I say. Was it you who break your promise first, or was it I who did not keep my word?"

Song Qingshu hesitated for half a day before saying, "You wanted me to put poison in Tai Shifu and my father's food; I would rather die than obeying your word. Just get your sword and kill me."

"Song Xiongdi," Chen Youliang said, "There is a saying that to understand the directions of the age is an outstanding talent. We do not want to murder your father and elders, we only want to drug them so they will lose consciousness. Didn't you agree to it at the Mi Le Temple?"

"No, no!" Song Qingshu said, "I did agree to drug them, but the poison Zhang Bo Longtou gathered was from vipers and centipede; this is a poison to kill people, not a common drug to lose someone's consciousness."

Slowly and unenthusiastically Chen Youliang raised his sword, saying, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou is as beautiful as a goddess, there is no other girl like her, yet you resign to the fact that she is going to fall into that guy Zhang Wuji. This is really strange. Song Xiongdi, that day, deep into the night, you went to peep into the room occupied by Emei Pai's female disciples. Your Qi Shishu caught you doing that, and he pursued you down. You fought him by the rocky ridge, and thus a nephew killed his uncle. Why did you do that? Wasn't it for the sake of this gentle and tender, good-looking Miss Zhou? This matter has come this far, once you have done it, you can't stop. Can the horse turn back once it enters a narrow pathway? I see that you have climbed the mountain 90% of the way, but fail for lack of a final effort.

It's a pity! It's a pity!"

Song Qingshu stood up shakily. "Chen Youliang," he angrily said, "Your words are sweet but insincere! You have forced me. That night I was defeated by Mo Qi Shu; I was not his match. I have brought disgrace to Wudang Pai. It would be a hundred times better if I died under his hands; who wanted you to interfere by giving me a hand? I have fallen into your scheme so deep that my reputation is swept away and I cannot free myself."

"Fine, fine!" Chen Youliang laughed, "Mo Shenggu died because of the 'zhen tian tie zhang' [iron palm shaking the heaven] on his back; was it you who hit him, or was it me, Chen Youliang who hit him? Isn't it your Wudang Pai's martial art? Certainly I cannot do that. That night I helped you, not only I saved your life, but protected your reputation as well; so you say I was wrong? Song Xiongdi, you and I came across each other, let's not raise the matters of the past up. About you killing your uncle, my mouth is as tight as a drum; I will never leak even for half a word. The mountain is far, the river is long, we will see each other again in the future."

In a trembling voice Song Qingshu said, "Chen ... Chen Dage, you ... what are you going to do to me?" His voice was full of doubt and uncertainty.

Chen Youliang laughed. "What am I going to do to you?" he said, "I am not going to do anything. Let me show you something. What is this?"

From their hiding place behind the rock, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were dying to stick out their heads to see the thing Chen Youliang took out, but in the end they decided against doing so.

“Ah!” they heard Song Qingshu cried out in alarm, “This ... this is the iron ring of Emei Pai’s Sect Leader,” his voice was trembling, “It is Miss Zhou’s ... You ... you ... where did you get it from?”

In his heart, Zhang Wuji also shuddered, he thought, “When I left Zhiruo, I plainly saw her still wearing this Sect Leader iron ring; how did it fall into Chen Youliang’s hand? Most likely it is a fake one, he forged it to swindle other people.”

But he heard Chen Youliang laugh lightly and said, “Look carefully, whether this is the real thing or a fake one.”

A moment later Song Qingshu said, “In the Western Region I asked Mijue Shitai for some pointers in martial art, I saw this ring on her finger. I believe this is real.”

A ‘clang!’ noise was heard, a sound of metal striking against metal. Chen Youliang said, “If it was fake, this sword should cut it into two. Look here, there is an inscription inside the ring, ‘liu yi xiang nu’ [bestowed to daughter Xiang] four characters, it can’t be fake, can it? This is the Emei Pai founder, Guo Xiang Nuxia’s [heroine Guo Xiang] xuan tie [black/mysterious iron – Yang Guo’s heavy sword] ring.”

Song Qingshu said, “Chen Dage, you ... where did you get it from? Miss Zhou, she ... is she all right?”

Chen Youliang laughed again, he said, “Zhang Bo Longtou, let’s go. From now on, the Beggar Clan has nothing to do with this person.” Footsteps were heard, the two of them turned around and left.

“Chen Dage, come back!” Song Qingshu called out, “Has Miss Zhou fallen into your hands? Is she still alive, or is she dead?”

Chen Youliang came back. With a smile on his face he said, "That's right. Miss Zhou is in my hands. A beautiful woman like her, no man's heart in this world will not be moved upon seeing her. Until now I am still single. I am thinking of asking Bangzhu earnestly to grant me Miss Zhou as my wife, chances are, Bangzhu will grant my request."

Song Qingshu mumbled indistinctly, apparently, he was at a loss of what to say. Chen Youliang continued, "Actually, a gentleman should not take someone else's prized possession. In order to win this Miss Zhou, Song Xiongdi has braved a grave disaster; how could for the sake of a beauty Chen Youliang ruin the 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood] between brothers? But since you have revolted against the Clan, there is no more kindness and righteousness between us; nothing is out of question anymore, right?"

Song Qingshu mumbled some more. From the corner of his eye, Zhang Wuji noticed there were two streams of tears flowing down Song Yuanqiao's cheeks; it was obvious that the grief in his heart had reached its peak. Suddenly they heard Song Qingshu say, "Chen Dage, Longtou Dage, as your little brother, I was confused; I beg your forgiveness. I hereby admit my guilt."

Chen Youliang laughed out loud and said, "Right, right! Now, that is my good brother. I put my hand on my heart to guarantee you that you only need to take this drug [orig. 'meng1 han4 yao4 - a medicine to knock someone's consciousness] to Mount Wudang, and then quietly put it into everybody's cup of tea. Your honorable elders' lives will not be harmed; the beautiful Zhou Zhiruo will certainly be your wife. We only want to coerce Zhang Sanfeng, Zhang Zhenren [respectable term to address a Taoist priest] and

the Wudang heroes into forcing Zhang Wuji to listen to our command. Supposing that we harmed Zhang Zhenren and your honorable father's lives, Zhang Wuji will only come to the Beggar Clan to exact the revenge; what good will that do to us?"

"That's correct," Song Qingshu said.

Chen Youliang continued, "Wait till the Beggar Clan has subdued the Ming Cult, driven out the Tartars, and ruled the earth; our Bangzhu will ascend to the throne [orig. long2 wei4 - dragon position], you and I will render meritorious service to the founder of the kingdom, needless to say, not only our wives and descendants will enjoy titles and positions, but your honorable father will benefit from your bright face."

With a bitter smile Song Qingshu said, "My Father does not seek fame and fortune. I only hope he will not kill me; then I will be satisfied."

"How can your father know about the party before it is over?" Chen Youliang said with a smile, "Unless he is a deity who can predict the future. Song Xiongdi, is your foot injured from the fall? Come, we can share the ride. We'll buy another horse in the next town."

Song Qingshu said, "A chunk of ice has bumped my calf because I was in such haste. As bad luck has it, it hit right on my 'zhu bin' [lit. building visitor] acupoint. There is indeed such a coincidence in this world." Because he was so preoccupied by Zhang Bo Longtou and Chen Youliang who were pursuing him, he had never thought that there were people who were plotting against him behind the large rock ahead. He only knew that he was being careless and the piece of ice happened to strike him on his acupoint.

“What bad luck?” Chen Youliang laughed and said, “I’ll say it was Song Xiongdi’s lucky day, to marry a beautiful woman as your wife. If there was no such strike, we would not be able to overtake you, and then you would be lost in your own confusion. Not only your reputation would be swept away, but you would ruin our major undertaking. If this sweet smelling, tender Miss Zhou become Chen Youliang’s possession, wouldn’t it be like a phoenix married a crow, a fresh flower stuck into a pile of manure?”

“Hmm,” Song Qingshu said, “Chen Dage, it’s not that Xiongdi is unable to tell good from bad, and does not believe you ...”

Without waiting for him to finish, Chen Youliang cut him off, “You want to see Miss Zhou, don’t you? That’s easy. At this moment Bangzhu and the elders are in Lulong [a city in Hebei], Miss Zhou is with them. As soon as we get to Lulong, you can see her. When the Mount Wudang task is accomplished, your Gege [elder brother] will hold the wedding celebration for you, to fulfill your greatest desire; and then you will be grateful to your Chen Youliang Dage for the rest of your life. Ha ha, ha ha ...!”

“All right,” Song Qingshu said, “Let us go to Lulong. Chen Dage, how did Miss Zhou ... how did she join our Clan?”

Chen Youliang laughed and said, “That was to Longtou Dage’s credit. That day Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou went eating and drinking in a restaurant. They saw three strangers who dressed like our Clan disciples, mingled among us. Later, they sent some people to investigate, and unexpectedly found one of them is this lovable and charming Miss Zhou. Zhang Bo Longtou then sent someone to invite her to come with us. Don’t worry, Miss Zhou is

auspiciously well; not a single strand of her hair is injured.”

Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, “Turned out that we were already detected on the restaurant that day. If only Yifu were not blind, he would certainly raise the alarm. Ay, to think that all along Zhiruo and I were not aware. But I wonder if Yifu is also well?”

However, all throughout the conversation, Chen Youliang did not mention a single word about Xie Xun. He said, “Miss Zhou and you are engaged, Emei and Wudang two Sects will be under the Beggar Clan’s command, add to that the Ming Cult; just how powerful can we be? We only need to defeat the Mongolians, and then this beautiful country [orig. jiang1 shan1 – river and mountain], heh, heh, will change its master.”

His voice was full of smugness, as if not only the Beggar Clan had already conquered the world, but he, Chen Youliang, had already ascended to the throne, and was sitting comfortably in the imperial courtyard. Zhang Bo Longtou and Song Qingshu followed him laughing ‘heh, heh’, hollow laughs.

“Let’s go,” Chen Youliang said, “Song Xiongdi, Mo Qixia died around here; the cave where we hid his corpse is not far from this place, is it? You ran to this place and suddenly stumbled, could it be that Mo Qixia’s spirit showed up? Ha ha, ha ha!” Song Qingshu did not reply. The three of them walked toward the horses and then left that place.

Zhang Wuji waited until they had gone far before he quickly unsealed Song Yuanqiao and the others’ acupoints, and then he knelt to the ground and kowtowed over and over again. “Shibo, Shishu,” he said, “Nephew was under suspicion and could not explain myself. I have offended you heavily,

please punish me.”

Song Yuanqiao heaved a deep sigh, tears streaming down from his eyes; he looked up to the sky without saying anything. Yu Lianzhou busily raised Zhang Wuji up and said, “We all have wrongly accused you. It was our own fault. We are as close as a flesh and blood family, let’s not talk about this anymore. I just can’t believe Qingshu ... ay, if we did not hear it with our own ears, who could have believed it?”

Song Yuanqiao pulled his sword out and said, “Turned out Qidi came across Qingshu, that little animal ... when he was peeking into Emei heroines’ bedroom. We must put our school’s internal affair in order. Three Shidi’s, Child Wuji, let us pursue them; let me slay that animal with my own hand.” Finished speaking, he launched his qing gong and ran to the direction Song Qingshu went.

“Dage, come back!” Zhang Songxi called out, “Everything needs to be considered further.”

In his disturbed mind, Song Yuanqiao ignored his call; he kept running with the sword in his hand. Zhang Wuji lifted up his feet to give a chase. Several leaps later, he cut off in front of Song Yuanqiao. Bowing down he said, “Da Shibo, Si Shibo wants to talk to you. Currently, Song Dage is under other’s influence; someday, he will come to his senses. If Da Shibo wants to punish him, you don’t have to do it right away.”

Song Yuanqiao sobbed, “Qidi ... Qidi ... your big brother has done you wrong.” Suddenly he remembered how Zhang Cuishan had killed himself because he felt he had done Yu Daiyan wrong; right at this moment he suddenly understood the depth of his Wu Di’s [fifth brother] feeling. Raising up his sword, he slashed it across his own neck.

Zhang Wuji was startled; using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to the fullest, he snatched the sword from Song Yuanqiao's hand. But the blade had already cut the neck, creating a long strip of bloody cut. By this time Yu Lianzhou and the others had already caught up.

"Dage," Zhang Songxi persuaded, "Qingshu is going astray by committing this kind of treason and betraying his own Sect, Wudang people will hold him responsible; but cleaning up our school is a small matter, our country's safety is big. We can't lose sight on the big matter for the sake of a small one."

Song Yuanqiao's eyes grew big; he was angry. "You ... you said cleaning up our school is a small matter? I ... I fathered this disobedient son ..."

"Listening to that Chen Youliang," Zhang Songxi said, "The Beggar Clan wants to borrow Qingshu's hands, scheming to harm our En Shi [benevolent master] and gain control over the major Sects of Wulin world, and conspiring against our country. En Shi's safety and well-being is the number one priority of our Sect; whether the Wulin world and the common people will have disaster or good fortune is even more important. This child Qingshu has done too much injustice; he will get his retribution sooner or later. We still need to discuss important matters."

Song Yuanqiao realized Zhang Songxi was very reasonable, he bitterly put the sword back into its sheathe and said, "My mind is troubled, I'll hear what Si Di has to say."

Yin Liting took out some cut-wound medication and wrapped it around Song Yuanqiao's neck. Zhang Songxi said, "The Beggar Clan has already sought to cause En Shi harm, and

at this moment En Shi still does not know the facts. We must travel day and night to return to Wudang. Although that Chen Youliang is going to use Song Qingshu, we will never know; perhaps this devious villain will make his move sooner than what is planned. Right now our most urgent task is to protect En Shi. En Shi is advanced in years; if that fake-Shaolin-monk-pretending-to-be-a-news-bearer case is repeated, we can't redeem it as his disciples even if we were to die ten thousand times." While saying that, he cast a glance toward Zhao Min, who was standing some distance away; he still resented how she had sent someone to assassinate Zhang Sanfeng.

Song Yuanqiao broke in cold sweats. "That's right, that's right!" he said in a trembling voice, "In my eagerness to kill that disobedient child, I pushed En Shi's safety and well being to the back of my brain. I truly deserve to die to put the cart before the horse. Such a muddle-head." And then he called out, "Let's go, let's go!"

"Wuji," Zhang Songxi turned toward Zhang Wuji, "We'll leave the rescuing of Miss Zhou to you. Come to Wudang whenever you are finished, then we'll talk again."

"I receive and obey Shibo's instruction," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhang Songxi continued in low voice, "This Miss Zhao has a heart of the wolf, you must be very careful. Song Qingshu is a bad example of a real warrior who cannot resist a beauty. You should not follow his example." Zhang Wuji nodded with his face blushing.

Immediately the Four Heroes of Wudang and Zhang Wuji buried Mo Shenggu behind a large rock. The five of them kowtowed and cried bitterly in front of his grave. And then Song Yuanqiao and his martial brothers, four people, left.

Zhao Min slowly walked towards Zhang Wuji and said, “Your Si Shibo told you to be careful and do not get deceived by this witch, and that Song Qingshu is a bad example, didn’t he?”

Zhang Wuji’s face turned completely red and he bashfully asked, “How do you know? Do you a super ear?”

“Humph,” Zhao Min said, “Let me tell you this: After considering this matter, Song Daxia and the others will not blame Song Qingshu for having an animal heart, instead, they will blame Zhou Jiejie [older sister Zhou] as the source of trouble [lit. red face muddling the water], by destroying a Wudang young hero.”

In his heart Zhang Wuji silently agreed that she might be right, but his mouth said, “Song Shibo and the others are reasonable gentlemen; how could they recklessly blame others?”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “The more they are gentlemen, the more they will blame others recklessly.” She was silent for a moment before laughing and saying, “Quickly go and save your Miss Zhou; it would be terrible for you if she fell into Song Qingshu’s hand.”

Zhang Wuji blushed again and asked, “Why would it be terrible?”

End of Chapter 32.

Chapter 33 - Long Flute, Short Zither, Flowing Yellow Clothes

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Four young women wearing white and four young women in black, each with a zither or a flute, stood on the eight directions. Amidst the sound of music, a woman entered the courtyard, wearing a soft yellow light robe; her left hand was taking along a twelve, thirteen years old girl.

Zhang Wuji went to fetch the horses, and then together with Zhao Min, they rode across the Great Wall. He thought his Yifu must have fallen into the Beggar Clan, but since the Beggar Clan wanted to use him to coerce the Ming Cult into submission, he supposed they would not do him any harm; although some humiliation would be unavoidable. However, Zhirou was as clear as crystal and as clean as jade; if the devious and cruel Chen Youliang and the shameless Song Qingshu forced her, her only option would be to die. Thinking to this point, he wished he would grow wings and fly to Lulong. Only, Zhao Min was still injured, they could not possibly travel without any sleep or rest.

That night, the two of them spent the night at a small inn. While lying down on the 'kang' [a heatable brick bed common in northern China] Zhang Wuji was deep in thought; the more he thought, the more anxious he got. He went outside Zhao Min's window; he heard her even breathing as she fell into a deep sleep, so he went to the front desk to get pen and ink. Tearing down a piece of paper from the registry book, he hastily wrote a letter, saying that because the matter was urgent, he made up his mind to continue the journey the very same night, and that he would find her after the matter is settled. He advised her to continue her journey home leisurely while she was still recuperating from her injury. He placed the paper on the table and put a piece of rock on it, and then he jumped out from the window and rushed southward.

By daybreak he managed to buy a horse, and kept changing horses along the way. After several days of traveling day and night like that, he finally arrived at Lulong. However, even by pursuing that fast, he did not see Chen, Song and Zhang Bo Longtou along the way. He figured that while he was traveling during the night, they were resting in an inn someplace, hence he missed them.

Lulong was a strategic city in Hebei province, where the Tang Dynasty's Jie Du Shi [provincial governor; in Tang times having military and civil authority, but only civil authority during Song] took his residence. It was attacked several times during the transition between the Songs and the Jins and suffered major damages. The city had never recovered all through the Yuan Dynasty, yet it had quite a large population.

Zhang Wuji went all over Lulong's main streets and small alleys, visited teahouses and wine shops, but surprisingly he did not see a single beggar. He felt very strange, "Such a big city, yet not a single beggar on the street; this is very unusual. Chen Youliang said that the Beggar Clan would have an assembly in here, certainly he was not lying. I think all beggars big and small within the city walls have gone to pay their respect to the Clan Leader. I must look for their meeting place, this way I can eavesdrop to find out whether Yifu and Zhiruo are really captured by the Beggar Clan."

He then visited all the temples, ancestral halls, abandoned gardens, and any open area around the city, but did not find a single clue. He even went to the villages on the outskirts of the city, but still did not see anything unusual. When evening came, he grew impatient, and could not help but thinking about Zhao Min. "I wouldn't be this clueless if she were here" he thought. Finally he decided on going to an inn.

After taking his dinner, he took a short nap, and then around the second hour [between 1 - 3 am], he flew out of the window and went everywhere to see if there was anything astir. But after looking to all directions, he saw the night was serene, without the least bit of sign that Jianghu characters were having a meeting.

He was disappointed; but suddenly he saw a light on a tall building toward southeast from where he was. He thought, "This building must belong to a high-ranking government official or some rich family; it has nothing to do with the Beggar Clan ...". He had not finished his train of thought when he saw a shadow flash; someone was leaping out from the window on the second floor. Only, he was quite some distance away from the building that he could not see clearly. He thought, "Can it be that there are some 'lu lin' [lit. green wood, a term usually refers to 'world of outlaws'] characters who are visiting this rich family house to commit a criminal act? Since I have nothing to do, I'd better check it out."

Utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness skill], he immediately rushed towards that big building. As he was leaping over the enclosing wall, he heard someone say, "Chen Zhanglao [elder Chen] is really bothersome; it was decided that we are going to assemble on the eighth of the first month in Laohekou [city in Hubei], yet he dispatched an urgent message for us to hurry along and wait over here. He is not Bangzhu, why does he have a say anyway? Ridiculous."

The voice was loud and clear, the speaker was obviously indignant; it turned out that they were on a Beggar Clan's business. As Zhang Wuji heard this, he was delighted. The voice came from the main hall, so he quietly crept toward it.

He heard Shi Huolong's voice reply, "Chen Zhanglao is a

genius; that damn Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-haired lion king] Xie Xun, who knows how many Jianghu people have been looking for him in these past twenty years, yet nobody has even caught the shadow of a lion hair's fart. But Chen Zhanglao managed to capture him just like that. Nobody in the Wulin world has ever accomplished that, let alone people within our own Clan ..."

Zhang Wuji was startled, but also glad that finally he heard something about his Yifu. He believed the Beggar Clan did not have any extraordinary masters and rescuing his Yifu would not be too difficult. He scanned the room pressing his eyes against a crack in the window. He saw that Shi Huolong was sitting inside, with Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two Elders, Zhang Bang Longtou and three eight-pouch elders sitting on the lower positions. There was another well-dressed middle-aged fat man; judging from his appearance, he looked like a rich government officer, but on his back he carried six pouches. Zhang Wuji quietly nodded his head, "No wonder" he thought, "Turns out that there is a rich Beggar Clan disciple in Lulong. Who would have thought a whole bunch of beggars will be having an assembly in a rich man's house?"

He heard Shi Huolong continue "Since Chen Zhanglao urgently wants us to wait in Lulong, he must have a valid reason. We are planning this important matter; his granny, this ... this ... we must be very cautious over this matter."

"Bangzhu," Zhang Bang Longtou said, "Please be informed that the reason the warriors in Jianghu are looking for Xie Xun is because they want to snatch the 'wu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the martial art world], the precious Tulong Saber. Presently, this precious saber is not within Xie Xun's possession. No matter how much we persuade or threaten him, he is not willing to reveal the precious saber's location. We are wasting our time capturing this blind man; what use

do we have of him other than making him to drink our wine and eat our food? In my opinion, we'd better torture him harshly; I want to see if he'd keep his mouth shut."

"No, that would be inappropriate," Shi Huolong replied, "We might spoil something by using force. Let's just wait for Chen Zhanglao and then we can talk about it at length."

Zhang Bang Longtou's face showed discontent; he seemed to be upset that Bangzhu always wanted to hear what Chen Youliang had to say in everything.

Shi Huolong took out a letter and handed it over to Zhang Bang Longtou. "Feng Xiongdi [brother Feng]," he said, "I want you to go to Haozhou immediately and deliver this letter to Han Shantong. Tell him that his son is with us, he is safe and sound. We only want Han Shantong to submit under our Clan's authority, and then we will view his son in a new light."

"Delivering a letter is a minor matter," Zhang Bang Longtou said, "Do I need to personally take the trip to do it?"

Shi Huolong's countenance slightly dropped, he said, "Speaking of military accomplishment, Han Shantong and his comrades have created quite a stir within this last half a year or so. I hear his subordinates, that damn Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others, have raised up their arms and very much all of them have some stinking ability. This time I am asking Feng Xiongdi to personally deliver this letter, first, to make sure Han Shantong will submit under our Clan; and while you are hanging around them, make sure you find out what kind of plan he and his generals are cooking. Second, I want you to investigate what kind of strange secret those damn Ming Cult people are hiding. Feng Xiongdi, the task you are bearing on your shoulder is not light; how could

you say it is a minor matter?"

Zhang Bang Longtou did not dare to say anything anymore; he simply said, "I respectfully follow Bangzhu's instructions." He accepted the letter, saluted Shi Huolong, and then left the main hall.

Zhang Wuji kept on listening, but they were only talking about how in the future, after the Ming Cult, Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, and all other Sects were subdued, the Beggar Clan would flourish with awe-inspiring prestige. This Shi Huolong's wild ambitions were not as lofty as Chen Youliang's; if the Beggar Clan had a sole domination over the Jianghu and warriors in the Wulin world, he would be very satisfied. He was not thinking of ruling over the country [orig. jiang1 shan1 - river and mountain] by becoming the emperor. His language was vulgar, with a lot of dirty words.

After listening for a while, Zhang Wuji was fed up; he thought, "It seems like Yifu and Zhiruo are imprisoned here. I need to rescue them first then I'll give this big mouth, shameless beggar, a lesson."

His right foot moved slightly, he gently leaped toward a tall tree. Looking to all directions, he saw a dozen or so Beggar Clan disciples on the lower level. They had their weapons in their hands, going back and forth patrolling the area. Zhang Wuji thought that must be the place where they kept Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo prisoners. Slipping down the tree, he sneaked to the tall building nearby and hid behind a fake decorative hill. As soon as the two Beggar Clan disciples turned around and walked the other way, he leaped vertically up toward the second floor, where he saw bright light from lamps and candles. He stooped down underneath a window, trying to hear any sound of activity inside.

To his astonishment, after listening for a while, he did not hear anything inside. "How come there is nobody inside?" he thought, "Could it be that the person in here is a martial art master who is able to stop his breathing?" But after listening a moment longer and still did not hear any breathing noise, he stretched out his neck to peek into the room via a crack in the window.

He saw a pair of large candles on the table, which had been burned more than half of their original length, but there was not a single human shadow to be seen. There were three rooms on the second floor, located side by side. The one on the immediate east of him was unoccupied, so he peeked into the room on the west. This room was also brightly lit. He saw cups and bowls scattered on the table, about enough to be used by seven, eight people. The wine in the cup had not dried up, the vegetable and meat dishes had not been finished, but there was not a single human being inside the room. It looked like the people had not been eating and drinking too long when they had to leave the room in a hurry.

The room in the middle was pitch-black like a cave. He lightly pushed the door, but it was bolted from the inside. "Yifu, are you in there?" he called out in low voice. Nobody answered. Zhang Wuji thought, "Apparently, Yifu is not here. But why do the Beggar Clan people set up such a strict security? Could it be that they are running the 'real is fake, fake is real' tactic?"

Suddenly he caught a whiff of smell of reeking blood coming out from the middle room. He was alarmed. With his left hand pressed against the door, he exerted his internal energy and 'crack!' the bolt broke. Quick as a flash he darted inside to catch the broken bolt so that it would not fall on the floor and create some noise.

He only took one step forward when his foot stumbled on an

object on the floor. It felt soft like it was a human body. He stooped down to touch the object and indeed it was a lifeless human body. This person had ceased breathing, but his face was still a bit warm; looked like he died not too long ago. Zhang Wuji traced the corpse's head and found the head to be small with pointy chin, definitely it wasn't Xie Xun's head. He was relieved. Taking another step he bumped into two more bodies. He went to the western wooden partition and poked his finger to let the candlelight from the adjacent room passing through. He saw seven, eight Beggar Clan disciples scattered around the room, all dead. Obviously, they were killed because of heavy internal injury. He lifted a corpse up and tore the clothes off. He saw a deep fist imprint on that corpse's chest, breaking up his ribs; apparently, the power behind the fist was extraordinarily strong.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, "Turns out Yifu unleashed his mighty power and struck these guards dead." He looked around the room, and saw on a corner of the wall a picture of blazing fire, engraved with the tip of a sword; it was undoubtedly the symbol of the Ming Cult. He also noticed that the latch of the window was snapped off; the window was open. "That's right," Zhang Wuji thought, "The dark shadow I saw fleeing out the upstairs window a moment ago must be Yifu escaping. I wonder how was he captured by the Beggar Clan? It must be because his blindness made it difficult for him to guard against the Beggar Clan's deceit. If they did not use 'meng han yao' [drug, see Chapter 32], then they must have used some kind of trap [orig. ban4 ma3 suo3, dao3 gou1, yu2 wang3 - large rope to trip horses, hook to topple someone, fishnet] to capture him."

He went out the room in delight. Crouching by the door he looked downstairs and saw that the beggars were going back and forth on their patrol duty; they were completely oblivious of the accident happened on the second floor. Zhang Wuji

thought, “Yifu has not left too long, I can still overtake him. And then we, father and son, will come back and make an earth-shattering disturbance here, to teach these beggars the way we Ming Cult deal with our enemies.” Thinking to this point, his spirit rose. Remembering that the dark shadow he saw earlier went out from the west side, he jumped out to the enclosing wall using a tall tree as a stepping-stone, and then rushed to the west.

Following the main road, he ran for several ‘li’s before arriving on a fork on the road. He looked around looking for clue, and saw a blazing fire mark behind a rock, pointing to the road going southwest. Zhang Wuji was very happy thinking that now his Yifu’s whereabouts was clear and he would see him very soon.

Yang Xiao had explained the markings and signs used by the Ming Cult to communicate to each other to him in detail. He noticed that although this blazing fire sign had only several strokes the lines were bold; not many people within the Ming Cult were able to produce this kind of drawing other than people of Xie Xun’s caliber who was well-versed in both sword and pen [orig. wen² wu³ quan² cai²].

His doubts were gone. Hurriedly he took the small lane, straight to the relay station of Shahe [city in Hebei]. It was already dawn; he stopped by any restaurant along the way to buy some steamed buns and flatbreads to satisfy his hunger and then hurriedly continued his journey westward until he arrived at the small town of Bangzi. He saw another blazing fire symbol on the lower part of a wall on the corner of the street, pointing toward an abandoned ancestral hall. He was very happy thinking that his Yifu might be hiding in that hall.

As he got near the gate, he heard a clamoring noise of people talking and shouting as rowdy characters and people of

obscure background who gathered around the main hall, gambling. It turned out that this place was some kind of a gambling establishment.

The manager saw Zhang Wuji and noticed his fancy and expensive-looking attire, he knew a rich customer had arrived; busily he smiled and mumbling some welcoming words, "Gongziye [young master], come and roll the dice; your luck must be good, beat these three villagers." Turning his head he called out the crowd of gamblers, "Make room for Gongziye. Everybody, put your bet down, let Gongziye have his hands on the money!"

Zhang Wuji frowned, he knew these gamblers were not Jianghu characters. Raising his voice he called out, "Yifu, Yifu! Are you Senior in here?" He waited for a while, but nobody answered. He called out again several times.

Seeing he did not come to gamble, but shouting and creating disturbance instead, a ruffian called out, "Good child, your Senior is here, hurry up and roll the dice!" The main hall resounded with the sound of the ruffians' laughter.

Zhang Wuji asked the manager, "Did you see an elderly gentleman, big and tall, yellow hair, and blind eyes?"

As the manager realized this person did not come to gamble, but to look for someone, he was disappointed. He said with a laugh, "What a joke! You are saying that there is a blind man who came here to roll the dice? This blind man must be crazy!"

Zhang Wuji was not in a good mood as he failed to find his Yifu. Listening to the manager and that ruffian being rude and make fun of his Yifu, he took two steps forward, grabbed the manager and the ruffian, and casually flung them to the

roof. Although these two men were not injured, they were scared out of their wits and screamed like a pig being slaughtered.

Zhang Wuji pushed the crowd over and took two silver ingots from the gambling table. He said, "Gongziye is having his hands on the money." He put the silver into his pocket, and left the ancestral hall in big strides. The ruffians froze in fear; who would dare to chase him?

Zhang Wuji continued his journey westward. Not too long afterwards he saw another blazing fire sign. It was already evening, and he had arrived at Fengrun, another big city on the northern part of Hebei. Following the sign, he found a whitewashed wall with a black gate. The copper-ring door knockers were shiny, inside the wall plum blossoms were half-blooming; it was a quiet, elegant and clean house.

He picked the doorknockers and knocked three times. A short moment later he heard footsteps approaching. With a creaking noise the black door opened. A strong fragrance immediately attacked his nostrils. The one who answered the door was a girl wearing a pink leather jacket with a small knot on top of her head. She pursed her lips, laughed, and said, "Gongziye, long time no see. Jiejie [older sister] misses you very much. Come in and drink some tea." Her words were followed by another laugh, and then she threw a coquettish look at him.

Zhang Wuji was flabbergasted. "How did you know me? Who is your Jiejie?" he asked.

The girl laughed and said, "You still ask? Hurry up, don't let my Jiejie die of loneliness [orig. qian1 du3 gua4 chang2 - pulling the tripe, hanging the intestines]." Reaching out, she grabbed Zhang Wuji's right hand and pulled him in.

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished, "Why does she act like she has known me for a long time?" he wondered. But then he remembered, "Ah, right, Zhiruo must be staying in here; she knew I was following the sign all day looking for them, so she told this girl to wait for me. Ay, we haven't seen each other for many days now, Zhiruo must be dying of loneliness because she misses me very much." He felt tenderness in his heart and without hesitation, followed the girl inside.

They walked through a small pathway of cobblestones, passed a courtyard, and entered a side room. He saw a parrot perched beneath the eaves, which said in throaty voice, "Qing Gege [big brother Qing, or lit. 'passionate brother'. I am not sure whether the character 'Qing' here is someone's name, or it refers to 'beloved brother'] is here. Jiejie, Qing Gege is here."

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely, "Even a parrot knew," he thought.

He saw the chairs in that room were padded with embroidered cushions; the charcoal fire was raging, warming the room so that it felt like spring. There was a small incense burner on the table. The girl turned around and left, but a short moment later returned with a tray of six different fruits and a pot of green tea. She slowly poured the tea and handed it over to Zhang Wuji; and she actually pinched his wrist gently.

Zhang Wuji frowned; "How could the girl be this frivolous?" he thought. If Zhou Zhiruo saw them, wouldn't she be offended? Thereupon he asked, "Where is Xie Laoye [old master Xie]? Where is Miss Zhou?"

The girl laughed, "Why are you looking for Xie Laoye? Are

you jealous? What if my Jiejie came in and saw your expression? Look at you, you don't have any conscience; you come to our place, yet in your heart you keep thinking about some Miss Zhou and Miss Wang."

Zhang Wuji was startled, "'What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" he asked. That girl only pursed her lips, smiled and left the room.

A moment later, he heard the tinkling noise of bracelets. The curtain was lifted open, the girl returned, holding the hand of a woman around twenty one or twenty two of age. Her skin was snowy white, her face was quite beautiful with arched eyebrows and a grain of mole on the right corner of her mouth. She glanced at him gracefully, and smiled before she said anything. Her figure was elegant, and she welcomed him in a charming manner. Zhang Wuji felt a rich fragrance assailing his nostrils; he was really uncomfortable.

That woman said, "Xiang Gong [honorable master], what is your precious surname? Today you have come to pay me a visit, Xiao Nuzi [little/lowly girl, referring to herself] feels very honored." As she was speaking, her left hand landed on Zhang Wuji's shoulder.

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely and tried to evade. "My humble surname is Zhang," he said, "Is there a gentleman by the surname of Xie and a lady by the surname of Zhou in here?"

The woman smiled and said, "This is the 'li xiang yuan' [fragrance peach courtyard]; if you are looking for Zhou Xianxian, she lives at 'bi tao ju' [jade-green peach residence]. Are you so infatuated by that girl that you lost your mind and looking for Zhou Xianxian at the 'li xiang yuan'? Hee hee ...!"

Suddenly it dawned on Zhang Wuji that this place was a brothel. "Please forgive me," he said. Quick as a flash he slipped out the door.

The girl pursued him and called out, "Gongzi, in what way my Jiejie is inferior to Zhou Xianxian? Aren't you going to sit down even for a moment?"

Zhang Wuji repeatedly shook his hand; he fished out the silver ingot he took from the casino and tossed it to the ground, while flying out the gate. His mind was so troubled that he was not able to calm himself for a long time.

By this time, it was already dark. He was afraid he might miss the blazing fire signs along the way; therefore, he decided to find an inn to spend the night, while his heart was filled with disquieting thoughts. "Why did Yifu go to the casino and to the brothel? There must be a profound meaning behind all these actions, but what is it?" Sleeping to the middle of the night, he suddenly awakened, "Yifu is blind, how could he leave so many clear markings along the way? Could it be that Zhiruo was by his side giving him directions? Or could it be that the enemy deliberately faking our Cult signs to play a trick on me? Are they trying to lure me into ambush? Humph, entering the dragon's pool or the tiger's lair, I'll have to get to the bottom of this good or bad."

Early the next morning, he saw another blazing fire outside Fengrun's city gate, the sign was still pointing to the west. By following the sign, he arrived at Yutian [still another city in Hebei] around noon. Now the sign pointed toward a large house of a rich family. There were lanterns hung on the gate; seemed like the family was celebrating a joyous occasion. The lanterns were adorned with red characters 'zhi zi yu gui' [???? - I don't know how to translate this, the dictionary

gives me 'marry/wedding']; apparently, their daughter was getting married. The sound of music and the noise of guests filled the air. Zhang Wuji had learned his lesson; he did not rush in to ask Xie Xun's whereabouts, instead, he mingled with the guests to observe. But since he did not see anything unusual, he went out to look for another sign, and he did indeed find one on the trunk of a big tree nearby.

The blazing fire sign took him from Yutian to Sanhe, and then he was directed to the south until he arrived at Xianghe. By this time he was starting to have a thought, "Most likely the Beggar Clan is already aware that I am on their trails, therefore, they play the 'luring the tiger from the mountain' trick to get me as far away as possible, so that they can proceed with their shady evil business."

Although he was anxious, he did not dare to stop following the blazing fire signs fearing that it was really Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo who left them. "Supposing they were running away from strong enemies, and left these signs along the way with the hope that I will find and save them, but because I think I am smart, I return to Lulong, what if Yifu and Zhiruo finally die? Things have come this far, I have no choice but keep following these signs until everything comes to light."

From Xianghe to Baocheng, toward Dabaizhuang, Panzhuang, and then turning to southeast, toward Ninghe [a city in Tianjin], from here the blazing fire vanished without any trace; Zhang Wuji could not find any more signs. He explored the city of Ninghe, but did not see anything unusual. "It was definitely the Beggar Clan who led me over here, causing me to lose several days running around in vain." Thereupon he bought a horse to return to Lulong, and then at the second hand clothing store he found a white long gown. Borrowing a pen and some red ink, he drew a large blazing fire on the white gown; having determined to face

the Beggar Clan head-on as the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult.

Wearing the white gown, he went to the rich man's mansion in big strides. The main gate was a pair of huge red double-doors, which were tightly closed at that time. The shiny copper nails on the doors were the size of the mouth of a cup. Zhang Wuji pushed with both of his palms. 'Crash!' the huge double-doors flew up and landed in the middle of the courtyard. A series of resounding 'Bing! Bing! Bang! Bang!' sounds were heard as two large goldfish vats were smashed.

On top of his concern over Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo's safety these past few days, he felt that he was a victim of some practical joke, which made him going in circles around the Hebei province; he needed to vent up his frustration. This time coming back to the Beggar Clan headquarters, he was determined to confront them once and for all. As he split the gate open, he walked in big strides and shouted in a thunderous voice, "Beggar Clan people, hear me: have Shi Huolong come out and see me."

There were around a dozen four and five-pouch Beggar Clan disciples standing in the courtyard; they were already shocked when the gate suddenly flew in, now they saw a young man wearing white robe breaking in, some seven, eight people immediately shouted almost simultaneously and blocked this unwelcome guest, "Who are you?" "What do you want?"

Zhang Wuji raised both of his arms, a successive 'slam, slam' noise was heard as he struck the seven, eight Beggar Clan disciples, sending them flying toward a row of windows. Passing the courtyard, he went straight to the main hall. 'Bang!' he smashed the door to the hall, and saw a banquet table in the middle of the room, with Shi Huolong sitting on the head of the table.

As soon as the leaders of the Beggar Clan heard the loud commotion on the entrance, they immediately sent someone to investigate. But Zhang Wuji was so fast that as that seven-pouch disciple was hurrying outside, he met him halfway. With one hack Zhang Wuji grabbed his chest and threw him toward Shi Huolong.

The rich-looking host was sitting a few seats away from the head of the table. As he saw the seven-pouch disciple flying towards the banquet table, he stretched out his arms and caught the flying man. He felt the incoming force was earth shattering so he immediately launched the 'qian jin zhui' [a thousand-catty drop] to steady himself. To his surprise, 'bang, bang, bang' he was forced to repeatedly take seven, eight steps backward and did not stop until his back was against a large pillar. Loosening up his grip, he let the seven-pouch disciple down on the floor. He panted heavily, his body weakened, and he dropped to the floor right in front of that large pillar.

The crowd of beggars witnessed this scene with amazement. Right at that moment, they heard Zhang Wuji exclaim; he was both astonished and delighted, because he saw sitting on that round table, to the left of the head of the table, was a young woman, who was none other than Zhou Zhiruo. And the man who was sitting next to her was Song Qingshu.

"Wuji Gege!" Zhou Zhiruo cried out in shock. She tried to stand up, but her body swayed and she fell to the floor.

Zhang Wuji was startled, he rushed forward to hold her. But before he straightened his back up, a 'Slap!' and a 'Bang!' were heard as his back were simultaneously struck by Song Qingshu's palm and a Beggar Clan master's fist. But Zhang Wuji had already protected his whole body with the Jiu Yang

Shen Gong so that the power of the palm and the fist was immediately neutralized.

Holding Zhou Zhiruo in his arms, he jumped out to the courtyard. "How is Yifu?" he asked.

"I ... I ...," Zhou Zhiruo's voice was shaky.

"Is he [orig. lao3 ren2 jia1 - senior] all right?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"My acupoint is sealed by them ..." Zhou Zhiruo said.

Zhang Wuji only cared about Xie Xun, "How is Yifu?" he asked again.

"I don't know," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I was captured by them and brought here. I don't know Yifu's whereabouts."

Zhang Wuji laid her down on the ground and massaged several points on the joint of her leg. Who would have thought that Zhou Zhiruo's acupoint was sealed using a special technique and his massage did not show any result. Her feet were planted on the floor, yet she was unable to stand up; her knees bent and she sat back down.

All the beggars left their seats and stood on the steps in front of the courtyard. Shi Huolong cupped his fists and said, "Are you the Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult, Sire?"

Zhang Wuji knew he was facing a leader of a clan, so he must not fail to show courtesy; immediately he cupped his fists in return and said, "I don't dare. I beg Shi Bangzhu's forgiveness for breaking into your Clan's headquarters."

"Zhang Jiaozhu's name has shaken the Jianghu in the past

few years,” Shi Huolong said, “It’s like thunder ... ringing in my ear, and today seeing the old chap’s skill, which is really fierce, hey hey, my utmost admiration.”

Zhang Wuji said, “I come recklessly and have become Shi Bangzhu’s laughingstock. Where is my Yifu, Jin Mao Shi Wang [Golden-Haired Lion King]? Please let him, Senior, come out to see me.”

Shi Huolong’s face flushed, and then he laughed and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu is young, but your words are this bold. We invited Xie Shi Wang [Lion King Xie] with a good intention, to come ... to drink a cup of wine, but not only Xie Shi Wang left without bidding us farewell, he harmed our eight disciples with heavy hands; damn it [orig. ta nai nai, lit. his granny; a curse phrase], how are we going to settle this business? Why doesn’t Zhang Jiaozhu advise us on this?”

Zhang Wuji was startled, he thought, “Those eight Beggar Clan disciples were indeed the victims of Yifu’s heavy hands. It seems that he, Senior, is really not here. But where did he go?” Thereupon he said, “What about this Miss Zhou? Why did your Clan hold her captive here?”

“This ...,” Shi Huolong was startled.

Chen Youliang quickly interjected, “I hear people say that although Zhang Wuji of the Ming Cult possesses a strong martial art, he is a barbarian little devil head who does not have any regard of reason ... ha ha ...”

“Why?” Zhang Wuji’s face stayed calm and collected.

Chen Youliang said, “I have witnessed it today; hey hey, as sure as the shadow of a tree, as plain as your name.”

“Why did you call me barbarian without any regard of reason?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“This Miss Zhou is the Sect Leader of Emei Pai,” Chen Youliang replied, “She is the leading figure of an upright Sect; what relation does she have with your heretical Cult? This Song Qingshu Xiongdi is an up-and coming young leader of Wudang Pai, Miss Zhou and he are a perfect match [orig. lang2 cai2 nu3 mao4, lit. skilled young man, beautiful woman, and ‘zhu lian2 bi4 he2, lit. pearl matches with jade]; it is truly a harmony in social position and economic status, a pair of two-goodness. The two of them are passing by, and the Beggar Clan invited them to stay as our guests, to share a cup of wine with us. Why did the Ming Cult Jiaozhu unexpectedly come and intervene? That is funny, really funny!” Echoing what he just said, the crowd of beggars burst into loud laughter.

Zhang Wuji said, “If Miss Zhou is your guest, why did you seal her acupoints?”

“Miss Zhou was nicely sitting and drinking in here, talking and laughing. Who said her acupoints were sealed?” Chen Youliang said, “The relation between the Beggar Clan and Emei Pai is very deep; it goes for generations. The founder of Emei Pai, Shizu [martial ancestor] Guo Nuxia [heroine Guo] was our Clan’s previous leader, Huang Bangzhu’s beloved daughter. Our previous generation Yelu Bangzhu was Guo Nuxia’s brother-in-law. Unless you belong to the ignorant, wet-behind-the-ear generation, all Wulin people are aware about these historical facts. How can we, the Beggar Clan, offense the current Emai Pai’s Sect Leader? Zhang Jiaozhu’s accusation is unfounded, how can you prevent the heroes under the Heaven from sneering at you?”

Zhang Wuji laughed coldly and said, “So you are saying Miss

Zhou sealed her own acupoints?”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Chen Youliang said, “We have everybody here as our witness, Zhang Jiaozhu rushed in, snatched her by force without any propriety, and then took Miss Zhou out. Miss Zhou struggled to free herself, and then Sire sealed her acupoints. Zhang Jiaozhu, although it is difficult for heroes to resist beautiful face, and even though you are lecherous and want to have possession over her, this is a public place with numerous people; everybody’s eyes are on you. Zhang Jiaozhu, aren’t you degrading your own position by committing this reckless act?”

Zhang Wuji’s eloquence was far inferior to Chen Youliang, as he was receiving such a false countercharge, he was furious and it was even more difficult for him to refute. His countenance turned ashen and he shouted, “So you said you have decided not to tell me where my Yifu is?”

Chen Youliang also raised his voice, “Zhang Jiaozhu, your Cult’s Guang Ming Shi Zhe [emissary of the brightness] Yang Xiao has caused the death of Emei Pai’s Ji Xiaofu Nuxia. Everybody in the Wulin world knows about it, no need to point my finger. Now you are relying on your superior martial art to come over here and commit this kind of despicable, filthy shady business; I am afraid it will be difficult for you to escape justice.”

Zhang Wuji turned his head toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, “Zhiruo, tell me, how did they capture and take you here?”

“I ... I ... I ...” Zhou Zhiruo said the word ‘I’ three times, then suddenly her body went limp and she passed out.

The crowd of beggars broke into a commotion; they called out, “Ming Cult’s devil head killed her!” “Zhang Wuji could

not deny the charge and killed Emei Pai's Sect Leader!" "Kill the pervert thief Zhang Wuji, rid the world of trouble!"

Zhang Wuji was livid, he stepped forward in big strides toward Shi Huolong, thinking, "To subdue the criminals must capture the leader first; as long as I can catch Shi Huolong, good or bad is in his hands. I can force them to reveal my Yifu's whereabouts."

Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhi Fa Zhanglao blocked together. Zhang Bang Longtou brandished his iron stick, while Zhi Fa Zhanglao had a steel hook in his right hand and iron crutch in his left hand. Two men with three different weapons simultaneously attacked Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji let out a light whistling noise and launched Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. 'Clink! Clank!' Zhi Fa Zhanglao's right hand steel hook parried Zhang Bang Longtou's iron stick, his left hand's crutch threatened to smash his lower body.

On the side, Chuan Gong Zhanglao's sword was also thrust in; he called out, "This fellow's martial art is very weird, everybody must be careful." 'Swish, swish, swish!' three times, his sword curved like a rainbow, aiming Zhang Wuji's chest and lower abdomen.

"Good swordmanship!" Zhang Wuji praised his swift and fierce move. Evading sideways, his left forefinger pointed toward Chuan Gong Zhanglao's thigh.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao turned his sword over and the tip of the sword aimed toward Zhang Wuji's fingertip. This change happened so fast that the tips of the sword and the finger were only less than a hair-width apart. This sword move was a rarely seen masterpiece in the Wulin world. Zhang Wuji silently praised, "The Beggar Clan's name is revered in the

Jianghu, for a hundred of years did not decline. There are truly crouching tigers and hidden dragons within the Clan, such as this outstandingly capable man."

That day in the Mi Le Temple he saw the battle between the Xuan Ming Elders and the Beggar Clan's masters, but he was hidden on the tree and did not dare to expose himself to look closely. This time he experienced it first hand and found out that Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two elders were truly top ranking martial art experts of the present age. Zhang Bang Longtou was the weakest among them, but still, he was only a notch inferior to the other two.

In a flash, the Beggar Clan's three elders and Zhang Wuji had exchanged more than twenty stances. Suddenly Chen Youliang loudly called out, "Arrange the Killing Dog Formation!"

The crowd of beggars shouted and yelled; their blades flickered with a snowy white ray of light. There were 21 Beggar Clan martial art masters, each with a curved saber in their hands; they quickly spread out, surrounding Zhang Wuji in the middle. These twenty-one beggars were singing the 'lian hua luo' [falling lotus (flower)]. Some of them were moaning and groaning as if they were in pain, while some others beat their own chests with their fists, and some called out in loud voices, "Laoye, Taitai [master, mistress (or madam)], have compassion! Share us your cold rice!"

At first Zhang Wuji was stunned, but then he understood; these weird shouts and actions were to disturb the enemy's mind. He saw these beggars moved in a random pattern; they were advancing and retreating in haste, but upon a closer inspection, he found that actually they were following some strict pattern.

“Stop!” Chuan Gong Zhanglao shouted; he took two steps backward and lifted his sword horizontally across his chest. Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Zhang Bang Longtou also leaped backward, but the ‘killing dog formation’ was still jumping around here and there, their movements did not cease in the least bit.

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Chuan Gong Zhanglao called out, “We are relying on large number to gain victory; it is improper. But within the Beggar Clan there is not a single person who is worthy to be Sire’s match. Other than using this cowardly act, we can never fight you following the way of chivalry.”

Zhang Wuji smiled slightly and said, “Well said, well said.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao continued, “All of us are wielding some weapons, while Zhang Jiaozhu is bare-handed; the Beggar Clan should not take too much advantage over you. Whatever weapon Zhang Jiaozhu desires to use, we will respectfully offer that weapon to you.”

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, “This Chuan Gong Zhanglao not only possesses a high level of martial art, he is also chivalrous; he is totally different from that sly Chen Youliang.” He said, “Since I am playing around with you, why should I whirl a saber or sweep a staff? If I want to use weapon, can’t I fetch it myself?” As he was speaking, his shadow flashed to leave the ‘killing dog formation’. His hands moved and pressed both Chen Youliang’s and Song Qingshu’s shoulders. In a twinkling of an eye, he had already snatched their swords. His shadow flashed again and he returned to his original position.

The way he moved out and re-entered the formation was so fast that none of the moving twenty-one blades even touched the hem of his clothes. The crowd of beggars was frozen in amazement as they heard his loud and clear voice

say, "Your precious Clan's 'killing dog formation' has earned a very good reputation. Only, killing a dog is easy, but if you want to subdue a dragon or overcome a tiger, this formation is not of much use." While saying that, he raised the swords and transmitted his strength into the swords' blade. 'Crack, crack!' both the swords snapped into pieces.

"Everybody, move!" Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, his iron stick pointed toward Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhi Fa Zhanglao also brandished his hook and crutch into two circular snow flowers, sweeping toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji dashed to the left, but his body was slanted to the right, according to the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique. A series of white rays flashed by, followed by a series of 'pop, pop, pop' noise, as all the curved sabers in the hands of the beggars of the 'killing dog formation' were snatched by Zhang Wuji and thrown to the beam of the main hall. The twenty-one curved sabers were stuck neatly in one row, each saber entered the beam about one foot deep.

Suddenly Chen Youliang's voice was heard, "Zhang Wuji, aren't you going to stop?"

Zhang Wuji turned his head only to see Chen Youliang had a sword in his hand, with the tip pressed toward Zhou Zhiruo's back. With a cold laugh Zhang Wuji said, "For a hundred years the people of Jianghu say, 'the Ming Cult, the Beggar Clan, and the Shaolin Pai,' among the Jiao-Pai [cults and sects], the Ming Cult ranks first; among the Bang-Hui [clans and associations/societies] the Beggar Clan holds the highest honor. With your action, aren't you afraid of bringing disgrace on the prestige of Hong Qigong Laoxia [old hero]?"

"Chen Zhanglao," Chuan Gong Zhanglao angrily said, "Release Miss Zhou. We are fighting a life and death battle

with Zhang Jiaozhu. The Beggar Clan is pouring out the entire Clan's power to face Ming Cult Jiaozhu one man. If we do this despicable act, will any of us still have face to live an honorable life?"

Chen Youliang laughed. "Real men fight with wits and not with strength. Zhang Wuji, haven't you surrendered yet?"

"All right!" Zhang Wuji loudly laughed, "Today Zhang Wuji experienced the Beggar Clan's impressive power."

Abruptly he took two steps backward and flipped backward into the air; and when he fell back down, his legs landed on Shi Huolong's shoulders. His right palm laid flat on top of Shi Huolong's head, while his left palm grabbed the main artery on the back of Shi Huolong's neck. It was a stance from the martial art of Sheng Huo Ling, which was executed rather easily so that it surprised even Zhang Wuji himself.

His original intention was to take Shi Huolong by surprise with one of his weird moves. He had prepared three stances of the most difficult to be dealt with, combined with his lightning fast movement, to capture Shi Huolong. His only concern was that Chen Youliang would be truly cruel and merciless; perhaps he would really stab Zhou Zhiruo as soon as Zhang Wuji made his move. Who would have thought that he did not even need a single stance from the three fiercest stances he had already prepared, since Shi Huolong did not even attempt to resist and let himself be captured.

Zhang Wuji rode on Shi Huolong's shoulder just like a child riding on an adult. It was not the most elegant scene to behold, but since he had already gained control over the vital acupoints on the enemy's head, he was not willing to jump down and thus give the enemy a chance to take back control.

As they saw their Clan Leader was captured, the crowd of beggars cried out in alarm. Zhang Wuji's right palm laid flat on the 'bai hui xue' [hundred-meeting acupoint]; which was the intersection of the 'tai yang jing' [sun passage] and the 'du mai' [supervise artery]. It was the most important point on the human body. Zhang Wuji only need to tap it lightly, Shi Huolong's passages and arteries would be shaken and he would die violently; no medicine would be able to revive him.

Nobody within the Beggar Clan dared to move. From the clamoring noise of shouting and yelling, the main hall suddenly turned very quiet. All eyes were looking at Zhang Wuji and Shi Huolong; nobody knew what to do.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard the soft but clear sound of 'qin' [zither] and 'xiao' [flute, but not the modern traverse orchestral flute]. It sounded like there were several zithers and several flutes were being played together. The cheerful sound of music floated in the air, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, sometimes distinct, sometimes vague, but everybody was able to hear it clearly. Sometimes the music came from the east, another time it came from the west; nobody knew for certain from which part of the roof the sound of music came from.

Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised; he could not figure out the meaning of this zither-flute music.

In loud and clear voice Chen Youliang said, "Which Master has bestowed the Beggar Clan the honor of your arrival? If you are the devils from the Ming Cult, you might as well show yourselves; why would you play tricks on us?"

Suddenly the zither played three notes successively, 'zheng, zheng, zheng', and four young women wearing white

appeared on the east and west eaves, floating gently into the courtyard below; each woman had a zither in her hands. The zithers were half as long and half as wide as the ordinary seven-string zither of those days, yet they also have seven strings just like ordinary zithers. As the four women landed on the ground, they stood on the four corners of the courtyard.

Following them, from outside the door entered four young women in black, each with a black long flute in her hands. The flutes were twice as long as the commonly seen flutes of those days. These four women also took their positions on the four corners. Four women in white and four women in black, stood across from each other. Eight women forming a square, the four zithers played a happy tune, joined by the four flutes; together they made a beautiful instrumental ensemble. The music was very gentle and elegant. Zhang Wuji did not understand music, but it was as if the melody were dancing in the air, bringing a pleasant feeling to his ears. Although he was in a dangerous situation, he was willing to stop for a moment and listen to the music.

Amidst the sound of music, a woman entered the courtyard, wearing a soft yellow light robe; her left hand was taking along a twelve, thirteen years old girl. The woman appeared to be around twenty-seven, twenty-eight of age; her movements were graceful and her face was very beautiful, albeit looked a little pale, as if devoid of any blood.

On the contrary, the little girl was ugly; her nose curved upward, her mouth was wide, revealing two big front teeth, and she was carrying a mean and no-nonsense attitude. One of her hand was holding that beautiful lady's hand, while the other hand was holding a dark green bamboo stick. Ever since the crowd of beggars saw these two women walked in, their eyes had never stopped staring at that dark green bamboo stick.

Seeing these many women suddenly appear, Zhang Wuji was aware that he was still riding on Shi Huolong's shoulder and it looked like they were playing some kind of children's game; but Chen Youliang's sword had not left Zhou Zhiruo's back, certainly he could not easily release the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu. However, he also noticed that the eyes of everybody there were fixed on the bamboo stick on that little girl's hand, as if that bamboo stick was the most important object in the world. They did not even look at the women in white, the women in black, the beautiful lady in light yellow, or even looked at the ugly girl. Zhang Wuji was astonished. He silently examined the bamboo stick with his eyes, and saw the bamboo was very dark green, smooth and shiny; who knows how many hands this stick had passed on rubbed and stroked it. Other than that, he did not see anything unusual about it.

The beautiful lady in yellow scanned the hall; her eyes were as cold as lightning, gazing at everybody present. Finally, her eyes rested on Zhang Wuji's face. With an icy cold voice she said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, you are not a child anymore. Instead of acting properly, you are making a scene in here." She sounded like she was chiding Zhang Wuji, but her tone was friendly; it was as if an older sister was reprimanding her younger brother.

Zhang Wuji blushed. "The Beggar Clan's Chen Zhanglao used a dirty trick," he said in way of defense, "He holds my ... my companion hostage. In return, I captured their Bangzhu."

That beautiful lady showed a faint smile and said in gentle voice, "Don't you think riding on others' Bangzhu is a bit too much? I came from Chang'an [ancient name of Xi'an, the capital of China during the Tang Dynasty], and have heard along the way that the Ming Cult Jiaozhu is a young devil-

head. Today I see it with my own eyes. Ay, ay!" While saying that, she shook her pretty head, with a disapproving look on her face.

Suddenly Shi Huolong shouted, "Zhang Wuji, you pervert little thief, get down quickly!" He reached up to pull Zhang Wuji's legs, but since the main artery on the back of his neck, through which the vital energy flowed, was seized, he did not have the least bit of strength left.

Because he was cursed as 'pervert little thief' in front of these women, Zhang Wuji was furious and ashamed; he transmitted a whiff of internal energy through his left hand to the back of Shi Huolong's neck. Shi Huolong felt tingling sensation on his entire body, along with unbearable pain. "Aiyo! Aiyo! Aiyo!" he screamed.

The crowd of beggars were angry at seeing Zhang Wuji's rudeness, but also ashamed and upset at their Bangzhu's display of weakness. They felt that as Shi Huolong moaned and groaned under the enemy's hand, he was degrading his position as a hero and a warrior. Even an ordinary Beggar Clan disciple would not bow his head and show such weakness in front of the enemy, much less the leader of the number one clan in Jianghu.

"Zhang Wuji," Chen Youliang said, "Why don't you release our Shi Bangzhu while I pull my sword away?" Without waiting for a reply, he immediately put his sword back into its sheath. He knew Zhang Wuji would comply his request, and sure enough, Zhang Wuji replied, "Very well."

A shadow flashed, and Zhang Wuji was standing by Zhou Zhiruo again. He saw her eyes were deep and her expression weary; he could not help but feeling compassion and pity. Holding her hands, he helped her to sit down on a round rock

stool in the courtyard.

Chen Youliang turned toward that beautiful lady in yellow; he cupped his fists and said, "Your presence has honored our Clan. I wonder what instructions do you have for us? May we have the honor of learning your precious surname and your great given name?" To the ugly young girl he asked, "Young Miss, where did you get this bamboo stick?"

In a cold voice the beautiful lady in yellow said, "Where is Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou [Lightning Hand of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun? Tell him to come out and see me."

Zhang Wuji felt strange as he heard the seven characters 'Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun'; he saw Chen Youliang's expression suddenly changed, but he recovered quickly, and then with an indifferent voice he said, "Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun? Isn't that Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun's shifu? You'd better ask Zhang Jiaozhu of Ming Cult."

"Who are you, Sire?" the beautiful lady in yellow asked.

"My surname is Chen, given name Youliang," Chen Youliang replied, "I am a Beggar Clan eight-pouch elder."

The beautiful lady in yellow cast a sidelong glance toward Shi Huolong, and asked, "And who is this fellow? He looks like a warrior with a valiant spirit, why is he so useless? [orig. nong2 bao1 - cloth used to wrap a boil wound with pus on it] He was only punished lightly by others, and already screaming and crying. Truly unfit of his image."

The crowd of beggars felt their faces were lost; they were inwardly ashamed. Some of them cast their glances toward Shi Huolong with 30% disdain and 20% anger.

"This is our Clan's Shi Bangzhu," Chen Youliang said, "The Senior has just recently recovered from a serious illness. His body is still not well. You are the guest; we are yielding 30% to you. Don't blame us for offending you if you speak anymore nonsense." The last two sentences were spoken in stern voice and expression.

The beautiful lady in yellow was unfazed; she turned toward one of the women in black and said, "Xiao Cui, return the letter to him."

"Yes!" the girl in black replied. Taking a letter from her bosom, she held it on her hand.

Zhang Wuji took a glance and saw these characters on the envelope, 'To Master Han Shan Tong of the Ming Cult. Confidential.' And a smaller row of four characters, 'Shi of the Beggar Clan.'

As Zhang Bang Longtou saw the letter, immediately his face turned purple. "Little [female] slave," he cursed, "Turned out the joker who stole the letter from the Old Man along the way is you, the dead slave girl." In his anger he raised his iron staff high, ready to stake his all and pounce on the girl.

The girl in black chuckled and said, "I am a slave girl indeed [Translator's note: the word ya1tou2 literally means 'slave' or 'servant girl', but can also be translated as 'little girl']; but I am not dead yet. Such a big man like you, but failed in a simple task of delivering a letter. What a shame." Finished speaking, she waved her delicate hand and the letter flew smoothly toward Zhang Bang Longtou. Immediately Zhang Bang Longtou lifted his hand to catch the letter.

That night Zhang Wuji witnessed how Shi Huolong ordered Zhang Bang Longtou to deliver a letter for Han Shantong,

while holding Han Lin'er hostage to coerce Han Shantong to surrender to the Beggar Clan. Listening to the above exchange, he presumed it was these girls in white and in black who played joke on Zhang Bang Longtou along the way by stealing the letter, and thus forcing Zhang Bang Longtou to return to Lulong. But Zhang Bang Longtou had a strong martial art; listening to his words, it seemed like until this moment he did not know who had played the joke on him. Therefore, either these eight women possessed an outstanding resourcefulness, or they possessed a very high martial art skill; or it could be that the beautiful lady in yellow was behind all this, deliberately throwing the masters from the Beggar Clan into confusion. Thinking to this point, he felt grateful toward that lady in yellow.

The beautiful lady in yellow said, "Han Shantong is fighting around the rivers Huai and Si to drive the Tartars away. Along the way, I heard that he is kindhearted and chivalrous; he has never disturbed common people. A hero of his caliber, how can he betray the Ming Cult and surrender to the Beggar Clan for the sake of his son? If this letter ever reach the hand of Han Da Ye [master Han], the joke will be on you. I saw this Longtou Dage [big brother Longtou] is muddle-headed and funny; furthermore, there is an important matter within the Beggar Clan that requires his presence, hence I intercepted the letter."

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Many thanks Dajie [big sister] for your assistance. Zhang Wuji pays his respect."

The lady in yellow returned the respect. "Don't be overly courteous," she said. And then she addressed the Beggar Clan again, "Do you really believe that by capturing Han Lin'er you can compel Han Shantong to surrender? Zhang Bang Longtou Dage, along the way your trip was hindered several times. Do you think by detouring to smaller pathways

you can evade the obstructions? Hey hey, even if you did evade the obstructions and deliver this letter to Han Shantong; your Beggar Clan will not enjoy any advantage at all.”

Chen Youliang’s heart sank; he took the letter and saw that the envelope was still intact. Ripping the envelope open, he took the letter and as he browsed it, his countenance changed greatly. Originally it was a letter compelling Han Shantong to surrender, now it became a letter from the Beggar Clan begging the Ming Cult to accept its surrender. The language was very humble, in which the Beggar Clan was bowing and bending its knees, assuming the lowest position by cursing its own past conducts and deeds, admitting that they were ten thousands of unpardonable evil. Furthermore, it declared that from that day onward, the Beggar Clan decided to rectify its wrongdoings and asking the Ming Cult’s benevolence by not holding them responsible of their former misdeeds. It also promised to submit under the Ming Cult’s authority and be willing to be the vanguard in the great undertaking of expelling the Yuan.

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow coldly said, “I have seen the letter, but it wasn’t me who changed it. As I saw this letter, I realized Zhang Bang Longtou had already been tricked by others. My parents had a close relationship with the previous generation of the Beggar Clan. I do not wish the awe-inspiring prestige of the biggest clan in the world, which has been built since the days passed, to be disgraced like this today; hence I decided to interfere. Just think, if Zhang Bang Longtou delivered this letter to the Ming Cult, do you think the Beggar Clan would still have a face to stand in the Jianghu?”

One by one Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao, Zhang Bo Longtou, Zhang Bang Longtou and the others read the

letter, and every single one of them was shocked and angered; in their hearts, they all cried out, "We've been shamed!" They realized the truth in what that lady in yellow was saying, if this letter did indeed fall into the Ming Cult's hands, the Beggar Clan would be so disgraced that it would be difficult for the Beggar Clan disciples to stand straight in front of other people. Speaking of which, by intercepting the letter, the lady in yellow was actually doing a big favor toward the Beggar Clan. The question was: who stole the letter in the first place?

Xiao Cui, the maiden in black, laughed and said, "You want to know who changed the letter, don't you?" No one in the Beggar Clan responded, but their faces revealed their anxious desire to know.

"Zhang Bang Longtou," Xiao Cui said, "Take your outer robe off; you'll find the answer."

Early on Zhang Bang Longtou's face had turned red, with his veins bulging on his neck. As soon as he heard Xiao Cui, he ripped his outer robe with both hands. A series of 'Snap, snap' noise was heard as his buttons were pulled. He tossed the robe backward and barked, "Then what?"

"Ah!" he heard the crowd of beggars behind him cry together in alarm; obviously they had seen something strange.

"What?" Zhang Bang Longtou asked, while turning his body around, only to see six, seven people pointing their fingers toward his back.

Zhang Bang Longtou had never been known for his patience. Again his hands grabbed the lapels of his inner robe and ripped it open, revealing his muscular body. Spreading the inner robe open, he saw a picture of large bat in dark green

ink, its wings spread wide; its face bore a ferocious and terrifying expression, with some red dots representing drips of blood on the corner of its mouth.

“Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] Wei Yixiao!” Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others exclaimed in unison.

Previously, Wei Yixiao very seldom visited the Central Plains [zhong yuan], only a few people knew his name; but over the past few years, he had made several mysterious appearances in the Jianghu, displaying his full capabilities. As a result, his fame soared and in a short period of time it was in par with the Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king].

Zhang Wuji rejoiced secretly, “Other than Wei Xiong [brother Wei] with his superb ‘qing gong’ [lightness kungfu], which enables him to come and go without leaving any trace, it would be difficult to play a joke on Zhang Bang Longtou and leave him senseless.”

Zhang Bang Longtou was startled, he raised his inner robe and threw it on Zhang Wuji’s face, while cursing, “Fine! Turns out it was one from your group of evil bastards who played a joke on the Old Man.”

Zhang Wuji flicked his sleeve up and that inner robe floated slowly upward and landed on a forked branch of a ginkgo tree on that courtyard. As the robe fluttered in the wind, the picture of blood-sucking bat appeared to be alive.

“Zhang Bang Longtou,” Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “My humble cult’s Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei] has shown you mercy; don’t you understand? What if he decided to take your life?” As Zhang Bang Longtou thought about it, he could not help but shiver.

Chen Youliang realized that the longer he let this matter go on, the more disadvantageous it would be for them; the best plan would be to turn their attention someplace else. Thereupon he asked the lady in yellow, "May I ask Miss' honored surname? I wonder what relationship do you have with us?"

The lady in yellow laughed coldly and said, "What relationship do I have with you? I only have a relationship with this Dog Beating Stick." She pointed her finger to the dark green bamboo stick in the ugly girl's hand.

The crowd of beggars had early on recognized the stick to be the Dog Beating Stick [da gou bang], the symbol of authority of their own Clan's Clan Leader; however, they were not clear on how this stick could fall into someone else's hand. Everybody turned their attention toward Shi Huolong. They saw his face was deathly pale and looked desperate.

"Bangzhu," Chuan Gong Zhanglao asked, "Is the Dog Beating Stick in this girl's hand fake?"

"I ... I ..." Shi Huolong stammered, "I think it is a fake."

"Fine," the lady in yellow said, "Take the real Dog Beating Stick out so that we can compare the two sticks."

"The Dog Beating Stick is the Beggar Clan's most precious article, how can we casually show it to anybody?" Shi Huolong replied, "I don't have it with me, because if I lose it, won't it be terrible?"

As the crowd of beggars listened to him, they felt he did not make any sense; as the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, how could he be afraid to lose the Dog Beating Stick?

The little girl lifted high the bamboo stick and with a loud voice said, "Everybody, come and see. This Dog Beating Stick is our Clan's ... our Clan's heritage, which was passed on from the first generation to the next. How can it be a fake?"

As the crowd of beggars heard her saying 'Our Clan', they were astonished; so they came near to examine the stick. They saw the stick was as crystal-clear and smooth as jade, and as hard as iron; without any doubt this was the real Clan Leader's symbol of authority. They looked at each other in confusion.

The lady in yellow said, "It is widely known that the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms and the Dog Beating Stick technique are two of the Bangzhu of the Beggar Clan's most famous divine skills. Xiao Hong, go and ask Shi Bangzhu for some advice in the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms first, and then Xiao Ling, after Xiao Hong Jiejie [elder sister] has won, ask Shi Bangzhu for some advice in the Dog Beating Stick technique." Two flute-player young girls responded and jumped out; they stood side by side in the courtyard.

Chen Youliang indignantly said, "By not willing to reveal your name, Miss has already despised the Beggar Clan; and now you ordered two little maids to fight our Bangzhu. How can there be such logic in the Jianghu? Shi Bangzhu, let disciple deal with these two maids first, and then we can ask this Miss to show her expertise. In the end we will see what kind of master has showed such contempt toward the Beggar Clan."

"Damn it! [orig. ta1 nai3 nai5 - his granny]" Shi Huolong said, "Very well, Chen Zhanglao, please take care of this matter for me."

‘Swish!’ Chen Youliang unsheathed his sword, and slowly walked to the courtyard.

Xiao Hong said, “Miss told me to ask some advice in the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms. Do you know this palm technique? Does the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms technique use a sword?”

“What kind of position do you think Shi Bangzhu holds?” Chen Youliang shouted in response, “How can he fight a lowly servant like you? The Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms is a divine skill, how can a lowly servant like you see it that easily?” While saying that, he took another step forward.

The lady in yellow turned toward Zhang Wuji and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, please do me a favor.”

“Just say it,” Zhang Wuji replied.

The lady in yellow said, “Could you get rid of this fellow surnamed Chen for me? And then, unmask that big fraud who pretends to be Shi Bangzhu.”

When Zhang Wuji was successful in capturing Shi Huolong with only one move, he had thought that his martial art skill was only mediocre. He also recalled when Han Lin’er spat some phlegm to him, surprisingly Shi Huolong was not able to evade. Doubt started to rise in Zhang Wuji’s heart; especially after witnessing that in everything he had always listened to Chen Youliang without any ideas of his own. Based on his martial art skill, knowledge and experience, he was unfit to become the leader of the Beggar Clan. This time he heard the lady in yellow say that he was a ‘big fraud who pretends to be Shi Bangzhu’, his suspicion was confirmed and thus he understood 60, 70%. He nodded and immediately went toward Shi Huolong.

Shi Huolong launched the 'chong tian pao' [shattering the sky cannon]. 'Bang!' his fist hit Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji laughed out loud and said, "Is the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms this useless?" [again, the original word is 'nong bao', see above] Reaching out, he grabbed Shi Huolong's collar and lifted him up.

Chen Youliang realized he was not Zhang Wuji's match; he quietly withdrew into the crowd without waiting for Zhang Wuji to make his move.

The ugly girl suddenly wailed and pounced toward Shi Huolong, hitting and pulling his clothes like crazy, while crying out, "You killed my Father, killed my Father, wicked thief!"

The acupoints on Shi Huolong's back were grabbed by Zhang Wuji so he was not able to move. He was a burly man and the girl's little fists only reached his belly. Zhang Wuji bent his arm to push his head down. The girl grabbed and pulled his hair. Suddenly the entire hair on Shi Huolong's head fell off, revealing his shiny bald head. Turned out he was bald and was using a wig. The girl continued randomly grab, scratch and pull; and she pulled away his nose, but no blood gushing out. Everybody was astonished. They looked closely and saw that the fallen piece of nose was a fake; his high nose was also a fake.

The crowd of beggars broke into a commotion; they asked together, "Who are you?" "Why did you pretend to be Shi Bangzhu?"

Zhang Wuji raised him up and then with a jerk he tossed him to the ground. Shi Huolong was knocked out and was

speechless for half a day. Zhang Wuji smiled faintly and withdrew; thinking that this man was masquerading Shi Huolong, and now that the fact was known, the crowd of beggars would certainly deal with him.

Zhang Bang Longtou was hot-tempered; he stepped forward and slapped that man left and right, 'Slap, slap, slap, slap' seven, eight times.

The fake Shi Huolong's cheeks were red and swollen. "It wasn't me, it wasn't me," he cried out loudly, "It was Chen ... Chen Zhanglao who told me to do it."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao's heart was stirred, he shouted, "Where is Chen Youliang?" But Chen Youliang's shadow was nowhere to be seen. Apparently as Chen Youliang realized his plot was uncovered, he quickly escaped and was already gone for a long time.

"Quickly chase him!" Zhi Fa Zhanglao barked his order. Several seven-pouch disciples responded and ran out of the gate to pursue.

"Mother of a thief! [this is a literal translation]" Zhang Bang Zhanglao cursed, "Who do you think you are, telling the Old Man to kowtow to you and call you 'Bangzhu'?" Raising his palm, he was about to slap again.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao quickly reached out to grab his hand. "Feng Xiongdi [brother Feng]," he said, "Don't be reckless. If you kill him, we won't find out anything from him." Turning toward the lady in yellow, he cupped his fists and respectfully said, "If Miss did not expose this man's deceitful scheme, we would still be kept in the dark. By your illustrious name, Miss was able to see through this deception. My humble Clan, from the biggest to the smallest, all are

indebted to you.”

The lady in yellow only gave a slight smile and said, “Xiao Nuzi [lit. little/lowly girl – referring to herself] lives in the deep of the mountain, and has never had any contact with outsiders; so knowing my name would be quite useless. As for this little sister, could it be that nobody in your clan recognize her?”

The crowd of beggars looked at the little girl, but nobody recognized her. Something suddenly stirred in Chuan Gong Zhanglao’s heart; he took a step forward and said, “She ... she ... she looks a bit like Mrs. Shi ... could it be ... could it be ...”

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow said, “Her surname is Shi, given name Hongshi [lit. red rock; different character from her surname ‘Shi’]; she is the only daughter of Shi Huolong, Shi Bangzhu. When Shi Bangzhu was dying, he sent Mrs. Shi and this girl, with the Dog Beating Stick in their hands, to look for me, asking me to avenge his grievance.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was shocked, “Miss!” he said, “Did you say Shi Bangzhu has already returned to Heaven? He ... how did the Senior die?”

After Yelu Qi, none of the previous generations Clan Leaders had been successful in mastering the entire Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms; the most any Clan Leader had ever learned was fourteen stances. Shi Huolong had mastered twelve stances. About twenty years ago, even though his internal energy was not strong enough, he forced himself in training of this heritage palm technique of his Clan. As a result, the upper half of his body was paralyzed; he could not move his arms. Thereupon he took his wife and went wandering on remote mountains in search of efficacious treatment of his

illness, and left the Beggar Clan affairs to Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two elders, and Zhang Bang and Zhang Bo two 'longtou' [leaders; lit. dragon head]. However, there was no clear coordination between the two elders and two leaders; everybody was taking care of his own business only. As a result, once again the Dirty Clothes and the Clean Clothes Factions were on bad terms with each other, and such a big clan gradually declined in power.

Before the sudden appearance of this fake Clan Leader, the younger Beggar Clan disciples had never seen their Bangzhu, plus Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others had not seen Shi Huolong for more than twenty years, and so looking at this fake Bangzhu's appearance, which held a very close resemblance with the real Bangzhu, who would have thought that this one was only an impersonator?

The lady in yellow sighed and said, "Shi Bangzhu died under the hands of Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed; thinking that he had personally seen Cheng Kun's body lying on the ground at the Brightness Peak, how could he kill Shi Huolong? Or perhaps it must be before he was killed at the Brightness Peak.

"Can I ask you a question, Miss?" he asked, "How long has Shi Bangzhu passed away?"

"Last year, on the sixth of the tenth month," the lady in yellow replied, "So it's been more than two months now."

"That's strange," Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder how does Miss know that Shi Bangzhu died under Cheng Kun that old thief's treacherous hands?"

The lady in yellow replied, "Mrs. Shi told me that Shi

Bangzhu fought this old man for twelve stances before than old man vomited blood and ran away. But Shi Bangzhu was also injured by that old man's palm strength. Shi Bangzhu knew his injury was very serious, and he expected that the old man would recover within three days and would return to pick a fight with him again. Immediately he talked to Mrs. Shi, telling her that the enemy was Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun. By that time Shi Bangzhu's paralyzed arms were actually about 90% recovered. With his mastery of the twelve stances of the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, his martial art skill could be considered one of the top ranking masters in the Jianghu, yet after exhausting his entire skill and strength, after the twelve stances were launched, he still could not escape the enemy's treacherous hands."

Listening to this point, the little girl Shi Hongshi broke into a loud cry. Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face also showed grief and indignation; he wiped the tears from Shi Hongshi's face with his dirty sleeve while saying, "Little Sister, Bangzhu's grievance is our Clan tens of thousands disciples' grievance. We will certainly capture that Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun and tear his body into ten thousand pieces to avenge Bangzhu's great hatred. I wonder where is your Mama?"

Shi Hongshi pointed at the lady in yellow. "My Mama is recuperating in Yang Jiejie's [elder sister Yang] home," she said. And that was when everybody knew the lady in yellow's surname was Yang, but as for what kind of person she was, nobody had the least bit of clue.

The lady in yellow sighed softly and said, "Mrs. Shi also suffered from Cheng Kun's palm. Her condition was not light. After making a long and wearisome journey, she arrived at my humble home totally exhausted. Whether she would recover, it's ... it's hard to say."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao hatefully said, "I wonder what kind of enmity this Cheng Kun has against our Lao Bangzhu [old/previous Clan Leader], that he dealt with him with such a treacherous hand?"

The lady in yellow said, "According to Mrs. Shi, who rephrased Shi Bangzhu's last words, Cheng Kun and he did not know each other personally, so there was no ground for enmity or revenge. Therefore, until the moment he died, Shi Bangzhu was unclear of the reason behind it. Mrs. Shi speculated that someone from the Beggar Clan somehow offended Cheng Kun that he exacted his revenge on Shi Bangzhu."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao was silent for a moment before saying, "To avoid Xie Xun, this Cheng Kun went into hiding from the Jianghu people dozens of years ago. How could a Beggar Clan disciple offend him? It seems like there is a misunderstanding involved here."

Zhang Bo Longtou had been listening quietly on the side without saying anything, but suddenly he grabbed a curved saber and placed it on Shi Huolong's impersonator's neck while shouting, "What's your name? Why did you impersonate Shi Bangzhu? Speak up! And if you lie, even half a word... humph, humph!" While saying that, his curved-saber hacked diagonally and split a nearby chair into two pieces, and then he immediately returned the saber on the bald-man's neck.

The bald man was so scared that he felt his soul was leaving his body. "I ... I ..." he stammered, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly person] is called 'lai tou yuan' [Scabies Turtle Head] Liu Ao. I was the chief of a mountain stronghold on the Jixian county of Shanxi province. That day I went down the mountain to do our business without any capital, when we met Chen

Youliang, Chen Zhanglao, and Chen Zhanglao's Shifu. With one kick Chen Zhanglao made Xiao Ren flip on the ground. He raised his sword ready to kill. Xiao Ren promptly kowtowed asking for mercy. Chen Zhanglao looked at Xiao Ren carefully. He suddenly said, 'Shifu, this little thief looks very much like the man we met the day before yesterday.' His shifu shook his head and said, 'Hey, hey, the age is not right, nose is too low, plus he is bald.' Chen Zhanglao laughed and said, 'Disciple has a way to fix that.' Thereupon he told Xiao Ren to follow them to Jiexian, and we went into an inn. Chen Zhanglao applied some plaster to make Xiao Ren's nose higher, and then he put a wig on Xiao Ren's head so that I assumed the appearance ... of that old gentleman. Even if Xiao Ren had a nerve as high as the sky, I would never have dared to play any trick on you. Only Chen Zhanglao said so, what could Xiao Ren do? Xiao Ren's dog life is in his hand, there ... there is no other way. Xiao Ren still has an eighty-year old Mother at home, please spare my life." While saying that, he bent his knees and kowtowed, knocking his head on the ground repeatedly.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao pondered for a while before saying, "Chen Youliang's school background is Shaolin Pai; his shifu must be a senior monk in the Shaolin Temple. He ... does he have any other shifu?"

His words reminded Zhang Wuji of something. "That's right," he interjected, "His shifu is Cheng Kun." Thereupon he told them briefly how Cheng Kun assumed the name Yuan Zhen and mingled among the Shaolin monks by becoming Kong Jian Shenseng's [divine monk] disciple. He also told Yuan Zhen's sneak attack of the Brightness Peak, and how in the end he was killed by Yin Yewang, but his body was suddenly missing.

Zhang Bo Longtou and Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "No doubt

about it. Cheng Kun faked his death on the Brightness Peak, and quietly slipped out amidst the confusion.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao angrily said, “Turns out the mastermind behind this treachery is that traitor Chen Youliang. Those two, master and disciple, have a wild ambition; in their futile attempt to dominate the world, they have killed Shi Bangzhu and sent this impersonator to be their puppet. Not only they wanted to force the Ming Cult into submission, they also want to subdue Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, three major sects. This scheme is not only treacherous we very seldom hear something like this either. Where is Song Qingshu? Where did Song Qingshu go?”

Up to this time, everybody had been focusing their attention toward the Beggar Clan’s Bangzhu, the lady in yellow, Shi Hongshi, and the others; nobody knew when Song Qingshu unexpectedly slipped away right on Chen Youliang’s heel. His departure confirmed their confidence that Chen Youliang’s sinister plot had finally been thwarted.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao bowed deeply toward the lady in yellow and said, “Miss has truly shown a great kindness towards our humble Clan. The Beggar Clan does not know how to pay you back.”

The lady in yellow smiled slightly and said, “My ancestors had a deep relationship with your honorable Clan’s previous generation, this tiny deed does not worth mentioning. Please take a good care of this Shi little sister.” Bowing in respect, her yellow shadow flashed and she had already flown to the roof.

“Miss,” Chuan Gong Zhanglao called out, “Please stay for a while.”

The four girls in black and the four girls in white also jumped to the roof, accompanied by the tinkling sound of the zither and the mellow sound of the flute. In a short moment, the zither-flute ensemble drifted away, until finally their music vanished. As sudden as their arrival, their departure was also swift. Everybody felt as if something was lost from their lives.

Holding Shi Hongshi's hand, Chuan Gong Zhanglao said to Zhang Wuji, "Zhang Jiaozhu, would you please come into the inner hall to talk."

The crowd of beggars respectfully stood on the side, opening up a way for Zhang Wuji to walk in. Zhang Wuji went into the hall and was seated as Chuan Gong Zhanglao's honorable guest. Zhou Zhiruo sat next to him.

After asking the names of Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others, Zhang Wuji said, "Cao Zhanglao, if my Yifu Jin Mao Shi Wang is with your honorable Clan, would you please have him come out to see me; if he is not, would you please tell me his whereabouts?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao heaved a deep sigh and said, "That traitor Chen Youliang has played a trick on us, making the Beggar Clan ashamed to face the heroes of this world. As Zhang Jiaozhu has mentioned, it was indeed we who invited Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] and this Miss Zhou outside the Great Wall. Xie Daxia was sick and lost his consciousness on the bed. Without any fight we brought them both to this place. Five days ago in the evening, Xie Daxia suddenly struck dead our humble Clan disciples who happened to guard him, and then he escaped. The coffins of Beggar Clan disciples who died violently are still on the rear courtyard. If Zhang Jiaozhu does not believe me, you can go to the rear courtyard and see for yourself."

Zhang Wuji could hear the sincerity in his words; besides, he had seen with his own eyes the corpses of the Beggar Clan disciples scattered around that second floor room the other night. Thereupon he said, "Cao Zhanglao has stated the fact, how can I dare not to believe?" And then he asked, "From Lulong going westward, there are signs used by my humble Cult people to communicate with each other, I thought they were left by our Cult brethren; I wonder if your Clan has anything to do with it?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "I am not sure if it was that fellow Chen Youliang's doing, but to my shame, Xiongdi [brother] does not have any knowledge of it."

Zhang Wuji nodded. He pondered a while and then he understood. "At the Brightness Peak that Cheng Kun was able to come and go as he pleased; obviously he knew our Cult's signs. Since this man is not dead, the one who left the signs to deceive others must be him. But if my Yifu really fell into Cheng Kun's hands ..." Thinking to this point, sweats broke on his forehead. Calming himself down, he asked Shi Hongshi, "Little Sister, where does this Yang Jiejie live? Did you know her previously?"

Shi Hongshi shook her head, "I did not know her. After Father died, Mama took me, taking Father's bamboo stick along, riding on a cart for many days. And then we did not ride the cart anymore, but climbing the mountain instead. Mama could not walk anymore, she took a rest. And then she crawled on the ground. And then we got to the outside of a forest. Mama called out several times. And then Xiao Jiejie ['little' elder sister] wearing black came out. After that Yang Jiejie came out. She asked Mama many questions. And then she took the bamboo stick and left for half a day. Afterwards Mama passed out. And then Yang Jiejie took me, she also took eight Xiao Jiejie wearing black and wearing white. We rode on

a cart and came here.”

She was too young and did not understand much; when asked about the place, the day and the time, she could not give any answer, there was not the least bit of useful information came out of her mouth.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, “Your precious Cult’s Master Han Shantong’s young master is still with us.” Turning around he gave some orders to a Beggar Clan disciple, who then left in a hurry.

Not too long afterwards, they heard Han Lin’er’s loud voice from the rear hall, cursing and scolding, “You are a bunch of stinky no-good beggars, you still want to deceive your father? Our Zhang Jiaozhu holds a highly respected position; how can he come to your stinky beggars’ lair? Hurry up, send your father to the western sky. Your sneaky evil plan won’t work against me.”

As the elders heard him, they all had ashamed look on their faces. Zhang Wuji respected Han Lin’er’s guts and his unyielding character; he stood up and rushed several steps forward. In big strides Han Lin’er angrily walked in from behind the wall. Zhang Wuji met him and said, “Han Dage [big brother Han], I am here. I am sorry that you have suffered these past few days.”

Han Lin’er was startled; in his extreme delight he knelt down immediately and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, you [orig. lao3ren2jia1 – Senior] are really here. Xiao Ren [little/lowly person – reference to self] is relieved. Please issue an order to wipe these stinky beggars out.”

With a smile on his face Zhang Wuji helped him up and said, “Han Dage, the Beggar Clan Elders have also fallen under

other people's sinister plot; there has been some misunderstanding. But everything is clear now, everybody becomes good friends. Looking at my face, I hope Han Xiongdi [brother Han] do not take any offense."

Han Lin'er stood up, while giving Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others a glowering look. He wanted to shout some abusive words to vent his anger, but since the Cult Leader had already told him so, he had no choice but trying hard to repress his anger.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "With your bright presence today, you have given our humble Clan the greatest honor. Quickly reset the banquet table! Everyone, first, we welcome Zhang Jiaozhu; second, we apologize to the Emei Pai's Zhou Zhangmen [Sect Leader Zhou]; third, we apologize to Han Dage." Before he even finished talking, several disciples had already carried out his order.

Zhang Wuji still had his Yifu's safety hanging in his mind, plus he had many questions he would like to ask Zhou Zhiruo, therefore, he was not in the mood to eat and drink. Cupping his fists he said, "Your good intentions are highly appreciated, but I am anxious to find out about my Yifu. I will have to come back in the future to disturb you. Please excuse me."

Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others kept asking him to stay. Seeing their sincere invitation, Zhang Wuji thought that if he walked away, he would unavoidably offend the Beggar Clan. Therefore, he was obliged to stay and join the feast.

During the feast, the leaders of the Beggar Clan seriously reiterated their apology; they further promised to send the Beggar Clan disciples everywhere to inquire Xie Xun's whereabouts, and to let the Ming Cult know as soon as they

get any information. Zhang Wuji thanked them and from that day forward, he became friends with the 'Zhanglao's and 'Longtou's of the Beggar Clan. They drank to their hearts contents.

The Beggar Clan leaders noticed that Zhang Wuji was a young man highly skilled in martial arts, yet he was not arrogant, but generous and open-minded. Plus, he ardently made an effort to engage the Beggar Clan in the effort of driving the Tartars away. Everybody's hearts were won over with respect and admiration. When Zhang Wuji left, they sent him off ten 'li's outside the city of Lulong, before bidding him goodbye.

End of Chapter 33.

Chapter 34 - The Bride Tore the Red Dress Barehanded

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a red shadow flashed by, someone had already reached Zhao Min's back. From inside the red sleeve came a bare hand, with its five fingers struck down on top of Zhao Min's head. This move was like a rabbit evading the falcon; it was unbelievably fast, and it was more surprising since it came from the bride, Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er three people went south along the main road, riding the steeds given to them by the rich men of the Beggar Clan. Han Lin'er was very respectful toward his Cult Leader, he did not dare to ride abreast, but followed some distance behind. Along the way he would serve tea and attend to Zhang and Zhou's needs, acting as their servant. Zhang Wuji felt uncomfortable and said, "Han Dage, although within the Cult you are my subordinate brother, I do respect your character. In business matters you listen to my command, but in day-to-day relationship, we are of the same generation, just like brothers or friends."

With a terrified look on his face Han Lin'er replied, "Subordinate holds Jiaozhu in the highest regard, how can I be worthy to be considered of the same generation with you? In normal time I am not fortunate enough to be close to Jiaozhu; today I can provide my insignificant service to Jiaozhu with all my heart and that is subordinate's lifelong good fortune."

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, "I am not your Jiaozhu, you don't have to be this respectful to me."

Han Lin'er replied, "Miss Zhou is like a deity. Xiao Ren [little/lowly person – referring to self] can speak with you, it is already the good karma of my previous life. I am asking Miss' forgiveness for my uncouth behavior."

Zhou Zhiruo could hear the sincerity in his voice, while his eyes showed utmost respect as if she were really a deity. She knew she was beautiful, enough to shake any man's heart and make them beat faster; but she had never met somebody like Han Lin'er, who admire her almost to the point of worshipping her. It made her young heart extremely happy.

Zhang Wuji asked her how they were captured by the Beggar Clan. Zhou Zhiruo told him that not long after he left the inn that day, suddenly Xie Xun started shivering and became delirious. She was so scared and did all she could to comfort him, but apparently Xie Xun did not recognize her. He jumped madly around the room for a while before he collapsed to the ground and fainted. Right at that moment six, seven masters from the Beggar Clan broke into the room. She did not have enough time to pull her sword, and in the end the two of them were brought to Lulong.

When he was little, Zhang Wuji had heard that because of the main artery injury when training the 'Qi Shang Quan' [Seven-injury Fist], combined with the fact that his entire family was decimated by Cheng Kun, his Yifu would occasionally fall into mental confusion. However, Zhang Wuji had never expected that his Yifu's illness would breakout suddenly in such an unfortunate time that he was unable to resist the Beggar Clan's attack. Thinking of this, he could not restrain himself from sighing.

The two of them mulled over Xie Xun's whereabouts, but neither of them had any clue. Zhang Wuji said, "The Capital is the meeting place of all kinds of people, it is in our way going south. Let us stop by Dadu [lit. grand capital, modern day Beijing] to find some information. I think the Green-winged Bat King Wei Xiong [brother Wei] might holds some clues in his hands."

Zhou Zhiruo pursed her lips then she laughed and said, "Do you really want to go to Dadu to see Wei Yixiao?"

Zhang Wuji understood very well what she was saying, he could not help blushing while replying, "We might not see Wei Xiong, but if we can see Yang Zuoshi [left emissary

Yang], Ku Toutuo, Peng Heshang [Buddhist monk] or the others, they might be able to give me some ideas.”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “I know someone with divine ability in strategy, plotting and scheming. If you go to Dadu to find her, she will help you find a good idea. Yang Zuoshi, Ku Toutuo, Peng Heshang and the others are simply not equal to this Miss in term of intelligence.”

Zhang Wuji did not dare to mention that he met with Zhao Min. This time she mentioned her name, he could not help but feeling bashful. “You always remember Miss Zhao,” he said, “And are always happy to make me feel awkward.”

Zhou Zhiruo laughed and said, “I am not the only one who always remembers her; there is someone else beside me. I wouldn't be able to see what is in your heart unless you have guilty feelings.”

Zhang Wuji thought that Zhou Zhiruo and he were engaged [orig. bai2tou2zhi1yue1 - arrangement/agreement to live together until their heads are white]. This time they were facing a life and death situation together, their feelings could not be divided and he could not conceal anything from her. Thereupon he said, “Zhiruo, there is something I want to tell you. Please don't be angry.”

“I will be angry if I deserve to be angry,” Zhou Zhiruo said.

Zhang Wuji's heart sank. He thought that he had made a heavy oath in her presence that he would kill Zhao Min to avenge his cousin Yin Li, but when he saw Zhao Min, not only he did not kill her, he spent the night in the wilderness and traveled side-by-side with her instead. This matter was really difficult to explain. He was not good in fabricating lies, and he was ashamed of his own conduct, his awkward expression easily revealed his feelings.

While he was still musing, their rides had reached a small town. Noticing that the day was almost spent, they decided to lodge for the night in a small inn. After dinner, he massaged the acupoints on Zhou Zhiruo's back. He was not familiar with the Beggar Clan's sealing acupoint technique, but a long time had passed; after massaging her arteries all around, finally the acupoints were unsealed. He said in his heart, "Although the Beggar Clan Elders' martial art skill was not extremely strong, their acupoint sealing technique is really marvelous. Zhiruo is too proud to ask them to unseal the acupoints during the banquet, and the man who sealed her acupoint pretended to forget. Hey, hey, these beggars wanted to save face at all cost; after suffering a crushing defeat from me, they wanted to show their superiority in acupoint sealing technique."

Zhou Zhiruo did not like the musty smell of that inn. "Let us go out for a walk," she said, "I need to work my blood circulation."

"All right!" Zhang Wuji said. Holding her hand, he took her outside the town.

By this time the sun was setting, the western sky was as red as blood. They leisurely wandered for a while before finally sitting down under a big tree. They watched as the sun slowly disappeared behind the mountain and the sky gradually turned dark. Zhang Wuji gathered his courage and told her how he met Zhao Min at the Mi Le Temple, how they found Mo Shenggu's corpse inside a cave, how he met Song Yuanqiao and the others, and how he followed the Ming Cult's blazing fire signs in circle around the Hebei province; he told her everything. Finally he grabbed Zhou Zhiruo's hands and said, "Zhiruo, you and I are not married yet, but we can be considered husband and wife already; I am not

going to conceal anything from you. Miss Zhao insists to see my Yifu face to face; she says she has some important matters to ask him. At that time, a suspicion started to rise in my heart. Now, the more I think about it, the more afraid I am." As he was saying the last few sentences, his voice started to tremble.

"What are you afraid of?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji felt the pair of small hands in his palms was as cold as ice and slightly trembled. "I remember Yifu's illness," he said, "Whenever it breaks out, he would not recognize other people. In the past his madness suddenly flared-out, and he almost killed my Mama, thereupon Mama shot his eyes blind. When I was born, Yifu was about to kill my Papa and Mama, luckily he heard my cry and regained his consciousness. I am afraid ... I am really afraid ..."

"What are you afraid of?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "Actually, I cannot bear to say it, but I am really worried that my cousin was ... was ... killed by Yifu."

Zhou Zhiruo jumped up and with a shaky voice said, "Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] is a chivalrous hero who always upholds justice; he has always shown kindness and love toward us, his juniors. How can he kill Miss Yin?"

"It was a wild guess," Zhang Wuji replied, "Totally unfounded. Even if my cousin were really killed by Yifu, it was because of his chronic illness breaking out suddenly, just like a nightmare; certainly it was not his [orig. lao3ren2jia1] true intention. Ay, come to think about it, it was all because of Cheng Kun that evil villain."

Zhou Zhiruo was deep in thought for half a day before shaking her head and said, "Something is not right! Are you telling me that all of us being poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' was also because of him? Where did he get the poison from? Someone suddenly losing his sanity and killing people is not a strange occurrence, but how can he cautiously put poison in our food and drink?"

Zhang Wuji felt as if there was a thick fog hanging over his head, through which he could not see the least bit of bright light. He heard Zhou Zhiruo coldly say, "Wuji Gege [brother Wuji], you are doing your best to free Miss Zhao from any suspicion."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Supposing Miss Zhao was the real killer, it would be better for her to avoid Yifu. Why did she insist on seeing Yifu, saying that she had some important questions she'd like to ask him?"

With a cold laugh Zhou Zhiruo said, "This Miss' shrewdness is unparalleled. She wanted to clean herself from all charges. Don't you think she could not concoct some ingenious way?" All of a sudden her tone turned gentle and soft; she cuddled close to Zhang Wuji's body and said, "Wuji Gege, you are the most honest and upright person in the world. Speaking about shrewdness and resourcefulness, how can you be Miss Zhao's match?"

Zhang Wuji sighed, thinking that her words made perfect sense. He stretched out his arm to gently embrace her soft body; in a tender voice he said, "Zhiruo, I only feel that there are endless troubles in this world. Even someone close to me like Yifu cannot avoid my suspicion. I only wish we can accomplish our main task of driving out the Tartars, and then you and I will live in seclusion in some remote mountain, sharing a peaceful life and forget about the matters of this

mundane world.”

“You are the Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Supposing the Heaven blesses us that we can really drive the barbarians away, at that time, all important affairs of this world will fall into your Ming Cult’s hand, how can they let you live a peaceful life?”

“I am incompetent to be the Jiaozhu, and I don’t want to be the Jiaozhu,” Zhang Wuji said, “If the Ming Cult gains power, there must be a wise, righteous hero who would undertake the Jiaozhu position.”

“You are still young,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Although your competence is currently lacking, can’t you learn? Besides, I am the Sect Leader of Emei Pai; there is a heavy burden on my shoulders. When Shifu bestowed this Sect Leader’s iron ring to me, she commanded me to work hard for the glory of our school. Even if you could live in seclusion in some remote mountain, I am afraid I would not have that luxury.”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked the iron ring on her finger and said, “When I saw this ring in Chen Youliang’s hand, I was extremely anxious; I was afraid you might have been disgraced by those villains. I was wishing that I had wings so I could fly to you. Zhiruo, I was not able to rescue you sooner that you had to suffer wrongdoings longer. When did they return this iron ring to you?”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “It was Wudang Pai’s Song Qingshu Shaoxia [young hero] who returned it to me.”

Hearing her mentioning Song Qingshu’s name, suddenly Zhang Wuji remembered seeing her sitting side by side with Song Qingshu on the banquet table, eating and drinking together in the hall full of Beggar Clan people. “Song

Qingshu treated you very well, didn't he?" he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo could hear the difference in his tone. "What do you mean by 'treat you very well'?" she asked.

"Nothing," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am just asking. Song Dage [big brother Song] is infatuated with you, so much so that he did not hesitate to betray his school and rebel against his father, killing his martial uncle and scheming against his grandmaster. But to you, he was very good."

Zhou Zhiruo looked up toward the crescent moon rising on the eastern horizon and quietly said, "I will be satisfied if you can be half as good to me as he did."

Zhang Wuji replied, "I definitely cannot show you the kind of feeling Song Shige [martial (older) brother] has for you; I cannot commit these unfilial and unrighteous acts for your sake."

"For my sake, you certainly cannot. For Miss Zhao's sake, you can," Zhou Zhiruo said, "On that little island you have made a heavy oath to kill this witch to avenge Miss Yin. However, as soon as you saw her face, you forgot your pledge completely."

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji replied, "If after careful investigation I find out that it was indeed Miss Zhao who stole the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword, and that my Biaomei [(female) cousin] did indeed perish under her hands, I definitely will not spare her. But if she is innocent, I certainly cannot kill her without any reason, can I? Perhaps I made a mistake when I made that heavy oath on the island that day."

Zhou Zhiruo was silent.

“Did I say anything wrong?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“No!” Zhou Zhiruo replied, “I only remember on the Wan An Temple’s pagoda, I also made a very heavy oath in Shifu’s presence. I hate myself for not telling you about this heavy oath when you proposed to me on that island.”

Zhang Wuji was alarmed. “You ... what heavy oath did you make?” he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I was repeating what Shifu said, that if I became your wife in the future, my departed parents in the ground would not rest in peace, that my Shifu would become a malicious spirit, haunting me night and day for the rest of my life; and if I give birth to sons and daughters with you, let our sons become slaves and our daughters prostitutes.”

As he heard this kind of heavy and ominous oath, Zhang Wuji could not help but shiver. He was silent for half a day before saying, “Zhiruo, that oath does not count. Definitely it does not count. It was because your Shifu thought that the Ming Cult is an evil-doer devil cult, and that I was crafty and evil, a shameless pervert thief, that she forced you to make that heavy oath. If she [orig. lao3ren2jia1 – Senior] knew the truth, she would definitely free you from this oath.”

With tears streaming down her face, Zhou Zhiruo sobbed, “But she ... Senior would not know this.” As she said that, she threw herself into his bosom, while crying uncontrollably.

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her soft hair and consoled her, “If your Shifu in the netherworld knew it, she would definitely not blame you for violating your oath. Tell me, do you think I am really crafty and evil, a shameless pervert thief?”

While embracing his waist, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Right now you are not. But if you are bewitched by Zhao Min later, maybe ... maybe you will turn into crafty, evil and shameless."

Zhang Wuji lightly nudged her cheek with his finger and said with a laugh, "You underrate me too much. Is your husband that kind of person?"

Zhou Zhiruo looked up, her cheeks were still wet with tears, but her eyes bore a happy expression. "You are shameless," she said, "You are not my husband yet. If later on you sneakily go out with that little witch Zhao Min, I won't want to be with you anymore. Who will guarantee that in the future you will not be like that Song Qingshu, who for the sake of a woman committed a lot of contemptible, shameless shady acts?"

Zhang Wuji lowered his head and planted a kiss on her cheek, before laughing and saying, "Who told you as an immortal to descend to the earth? We are mere mortals, how can we resist your charm? I'll say it was your father and mother's fault that they bore too beautiful of a woman, who has the power to kill us, men!"

Suddenly, from behind a large tree about two 'zhang's away came 'hey, hey', sound of cold laughter. Zhang Wuji was hugging Zhou Zhiruo in his bosom. He was startled and turned his head only to see a shadow dashing away and gone far in a short moment. Zhou Zhiruo jumped up immediately. Her face paled. "It's Zhao Min!" she said in a shaky voice, "She is following us."

As Zhang Wuji heard the cold laugh, he knew it was a female voice, but it was hard for him to say it was Zhao Min for sure. In the dark of the night he could not distinguish

whose shadow he had seen. 'Was it her?' he asked doubtfully, "What is she doing following us?"

"She likes you!" Zhou Zhiruo indignantly said, "Are you telling me that you didn't know it? Most likely the two of you have a secret rendezvous to deliberately make a fool out of me."

Zhang Wuji repeatedly denied the accusation. Zhou Zhiruo stood unmoving in the cold wind, thinking about her fate and could not restrain her tears from falling down. Zhang Wuji gently wrapped his left arm around her shoulder, while with right sleeve he wiped away the tears from her eyes. "Why are you crying while we are having a good time?" he said tenderly, "If I did have a rendezvous with Miss Zhao in here, let the Heaven punish me and the Earth swallow me. Just think, if in my heart I did like her, and I knew she was near, why was I so crazy about you and said those affectionate words? Wouldn't that mean I deliberately make her angry and put her in an awkward situation?" Zhou Zhiruo sighed, "That's true," she said, "Wuji Gege, my heart is troubled."

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I can't forget my heavy oath in Shifu's presence," Zhou Zhiruo said, "I also think this Zhao Min will not let me go. I am too far inferior to her both in martial art and intelligence."

Zhang Wuji said, "I will do my best with all my strength to protect you all around. How can I allow her to harm even a strand of my beloved wife's hair?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "If I die in her hand, so be it; I only have my own cruel fate to blame. My only fear is that she

manages to confuse you that you believe her sweet talk and fall into her trap and come to kill me. If that happens, I will die with my eyes open.”

Zhang Wuji said with a laugh, “That is truly a groundless fear [orig. ‘the man of Qi fears the sky falling’]. Who knows how many people in this world have harmed me, offended me, but I have not killed any of them; why would I kill you?” Unbuttoning his clothes, he showed her the sword scar on his chest and said with a smile, “You stabbed me with the sword here! The deeper the wound, the deeper my love for you.”

Zhou Zhiruo stretched out her tender hand to gently stroke the scar on his chest, with disquieting thoughts filling her heart. Suddenly her face paled, and she said, “An eye for an eye. In the future, you will stab me dead, I will not regret.”

Zhang Wuji opened up his arms and pulled her into his embrace, while softly said, “Wait till we find Yifu, we’ll ask him, Senior, to preside over our wedding. And then the two of us will never leave each other, we’ll grow old together. If you like, you can stab me a few more times, I will not say a single harsh word to you. Is that good enough for you?”

Zhou Zhiruo nuzzled her cheeks on his fiery warm chest and said in low voice, “I do hope you are a real man who will keep your word, and won’t forget what you have said today.”

The two of them cuddled with each other for a long time. It was almost midnight and the wind grew stronger when they finally returned to the inn and went their separate rooms to sleep.

The next morning, three people continued their journey south; they did not see any sign of Zhao Min along the way.

They reached Dadu in less than a day. By the time they entered the city gate, it was already evening. They saw the residents, men and women, were busy sprinkling water to the dusty streets and sweeping the streets and alleys clean. There was an incense-burning table in front of every home. Zhang Wuji and the others found an inn and asked the attendant what major event was going on in the city.

“Honored guests came from afar and did not know that you have come at the right moment,” the attendant replied, “You will enjoy a fine sight, for tomorrow is the ‘Great Tour of Imperial City’ day.”

“What is a ‘Great Tour of Imperial City’ day?” Zhang Wuji asked.

The attendant replied, “Tomorrow is one day of the year when the Emperor will travel through the Imperial City. The Emperor is going to offer sacrifice and burn incense in the Qing Shou Si [Celebrate Life Temple], tens of thousands men and women will dress up in a parade, from start to finish the route is about thirty, forty ‘li’s long. Now, that will be a remarkable sight. I suggest the honored guests turn in to bed earlier tonight, and as you wake up really early tomorrow, go to the Jade Virtue Gate of the Palace to watch. If you are lucky, you might be able to see the Emperor, the Empress, the Concubines, the Prince and the Princess. Just think, as a lowly common people, how could we have the good fortune of seeing the Emperor with our own eyes if we weren’t living in Beijing [orig, Jing Shi]?”

Listening to this, Han Lin’er anger rose up; “Shameless traitor! [Translator’s note: the literal translation of the original sentence is: ‘regarding the enemy as (one’s) father, shameless traitor to Han (people)]” he scolded, “What good is the Tartar Emperor?”

The attendant's eyes grew really big; pointing at him he said, "You ... you ... what you said is the word of a rebel. Aren't you afraid your head might be chopped off?"

"You are a Han," Han Lin'er said, "The Tartars have harmed us miserably, yet you keep saying the Emperor this and the Emperor that; don't you have the least bit of patriotic spirit?"

Seeing his ferocious and threatening expression, the attendant turned around and left; Zhou Zhiruo lifted up her finger and quickly sealed the acupoint on his back. "If this man went out," she said, "He would open his mouth; I am afraid very soon there will be soldiers coming in here to give us trouble." While saying that she kicked the attendant under the bed. "Let him starve for a few days," she said with a laugh, "We'll let him go when we leave the city."

Before long, they heard the innkeeper calling out from outside, "Ah Fu, Ah Fu! Are you still chatting incessantly again? Quickly fetch some face-washing water for the guest in room three!"

Han Lin'er was amused; he slapped the table and called out, "Quickly send us some food and wine, your masters are hungry!"

A moment later, another attendant came in delivering food and wine, while muttering to himself, "Ah Fu must have gone to the palace to watch the fireworks. This kid has never done anything proper; he wants to have fun all the time."

Early morning on the next day, Zhang Wuji was just getting out of bed when he heard a clamorous noise on the street. He went to the door and saw the street was packed with men

and women wearing bright colored and fancy clothes. Everybody was heading north, while laughing and joking; the atmosphere was livelier than the New Year celebration, with incessant sounds of firecrackers coming from all directions.

Zhou Zhiruo also came to the door; she said, "Let us also go and watch."

"I have fought the warriors from the Ruyang Palace," Zhang Wuji said, "They must not find out I am here. If we want to go, we must go in disguise."

Immediately, along with Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er, they disguised themselves as farmers and villagers, by smearing yellow mud on their faces and hands; and then following the crowd on the street, they went to the Imperial Palace.

It was around the end of the fourth hour [between 5 - 7 am], and the beginning of the fifth hour [between 7 - 9 am], the ground around the Imperial Palace was like a sea of people; already they could not find a place to set their feet on. Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms to gently shoved people around to clear the way. Finally they stopped under the eave by the Yan Cun [lit. extended spring (season)] gate of a rich family home. The stairs rose several feet upward, which gave them an advantageous spot to watch the show.

They had not stood too long when they heard the banging noise of a gong. "They are here! They are here!" the crowd cried out. Everybody craned their necks to watch. The gong was getting nearer. They saw 108 big and tall men wearing dark green clothing. Their left hands lifting up big gongs, about three feet in diameter, and their right hands struck the gongs with mallets. When these 108 gongs were struck together, the noise was deafening.

The gong formation was followed by 360-man drum formation. After that it was people singing, blowing horn and beating the drum; followed by western region people playing 'pipa' [Chinese lute], and then Mongolian bugle horn. Each formation consisted of at least more than a hundred people, at most about four, five hundred people. After these marching ensembles, there were a couple of large red satin banners, flying high in the air. One banner carried these letters: 'An Bang Hu Guo' [peace to the nation, protecting the country], while the other said: 'Zhen Xie Fu Mo' [suppressing demonic influence, subduing the devil]. Other than these large letters, the banners were also full of bright golden Sanskrit characters. Before and after the banners each were two hundreds Mongolian elite troops, the imperial guards, with their long sabers glittering like snow, and their spears like the clouds; these four hundred men all rode on white horses. As the common people watched this display of formidable military prowess, they loudly cheered.

Zhang Wuji sighed inwardly, "In other places there aren't any common people who do not hate the Mongolian soldiers to the bones, but the people of Beijing have become shameless slaves of the government. To think that for decades day in and day out these people have seen Mongolian imperial household's impressive power, and thus have forgotten their own perished country."

As the two banners passed, suddenly from among the west crowd several white light flashed by; two rows of flying daggers flew straight toward the two flagpoles. Each row of flying daggers consisted of seven daggers. These seven daggers neatly pierced the flagpole. Although the flagpoles were thick, after receiving seven cuts, they swayed and finally broke; with a couple of whishing noises they fell down. People were yelling and screaming miserably, as

dozens of them were crushed by the flagpoles; while the rest of the people were also shouting and scrambling away. It was total chaos.

This change was so abrupt that even Zhang Wuji and the others were taken by surprise. Han Lin'er was very happy and was about to cheer when suddenly a soft palm reached out and cover his mouth; Zhou Zhiruo managed to curb his shout in time. The four hundred elite troops moved their weapons and charged into the crowd, randomly searched for the shooter.

Zhang Wuji noticed that whoever launched these fourteen flying daggers had a tremendous strength, obviously it was a martial art master of the Wulin world; only among those many onlookers, nobody could tell who the person was. If he could not see who did it, then how could the Mongolian soldiers? They blindly searched among the crowd and not too long afterwards dragged seven, eight men out, who called out miserably, "Injustice ..." But the Mongolian soldiers struck their blades and spears and killed those men on the spot.

Han Lin'er was very angry; "The flying daggers shooter has gone for long, what can this useless bunch do? They massacred innocent people to vent off their anger instead," he said.

"Han Dage, hold your voice!" Zhou Zhiruo hissed, "We are here to watch the 'Great Tour of Imperial City', not to create 'Great Trouble in the Imperial City'." [Translator's note: play of words here, 'Da You Huang Cheng' against 'Da Nao Huang Cheng']

"Yes," Han Lin'er said; he did not dare to open his mouth anymore.

The chaos only lasted a few moments; the sound of music quickly followed, other groups marched by one by one: acrobats who swallow knife and spit fire from their mouths, and various western region entertainers, which sent the crowd cheering and clapping again, quickly put the bloody incidents on the street out of their minds. Next came group by group of puppeteers, jugglers, performers balancing plates over sticks and all kinds of acrobatic acts. After these groups came large parade floats pulled by beautiful steeds. On each float there were handsome men and beautiful women dressed as characters of the classical stories, such as 'Journey to the West' [orig. Tang Sancang went to western sky to fetch the scripture], 'Emperor Tang Ming Touring the Moon Palace', 'Li Cunxiao Beat the Tiger', 'Liu Guanzhang Fought Lu Bu Three Times', 'Zhang Shengyue Gathered the Hawks', and so on; legendary battles and wonderful accomplishments, presented with the best of workmanship.

Zhang Wuji and the others, all three people, grew in poor rural environment; they had never seen this kind of bustling festive atmosphere. They sighed inwardly, thinking today their horizons were broadened.

On each float there was an embroidered silk banner, with inscriptions such as 'Humble Presentation of so-and-so, the Prefect of Hu Guang [Hubei and Hunan provinces]', or 'Respectfully Presented by so-and-so, the Governor of Jiangsu and Zhejiang'. As the procession passed by, the official who presented the float became progressively higher in rank; the float itself became progressively fancier, the men and women playing the characters were now wearing pearls and bright jewels, the hairpins and necklaces were also made of precious jadeite and precious stones. First, the Mongolian princes, dukes, and chancellors wanted to curry favor from the Emperor; second, they also wanted to flaunt

their prosperity; therefore, no expense was spared in the building and the adornment of the float.

Amidst the melodious sound of string and woodwind instruments, a float with the 'Liu Zhiyuan's Chronicle of the White Rabbit' theme passed by. Suddenly the cheerful melody changed into an awkward melody of old tune; the plain banner on the float read 'Zhou Gong banished Guan Cai'. On the float there was a middle-age man with a tablet in his hands [this is the tablet held by officials during imperial audience], he was playing the role of Zhou Gong. On his side sat a small child wearing an Emperor clothes, he was playing the part of the Emperor. Guan Shu and Cai Shu were standing on the side, whispering to each other and pointing their fingers to Zhou Gong. This float was followed by another float with 'Wang Mang's Hypocritical Act of Generosity'. The man on this float wore a very thick white face-powder, with gold and silver in his hands, pretending to give generously to poor people. Following these two floats was a cart with white banners on all four sides, with these writings on them, 'When Zhou Gong feared the days of rumor, Wang Mang enjoyed being praised as a polite and modest scholar. If both of them died at that time, their loyalty and talent would be hidden for eternity.'

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he mused, "The right and wrong, black and white, in this world is really not easy to know. Zhou Gong was a great sage, but when he banished Guan Shu and Cai Shu, everyone said he was scheming to usurp the throne. Wang Mang was a great traitor, but when at first he bought the people's hearts, there wasn't anybody in this world who did not sing praises to him. I heard these two stories on the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island from Yifu. This is the so-called 'the distant road tries the horse's strength, the course of time proves the man's heart'. A man's real character cannot be recognized in just a dawn-to-

dusk period.” Further, he thought, “These two floats are different than the rest of them. They obviously carry a profound meaning. The man who prepared them must have a character of scholarly knowledge.” And then he silently recited that poem twice in his mind.

Suddenly he heard sounds like broken gongs. A float came by, pulled by a pair of thin horses. The float was very plain and simple without any decoration. As the crowd saw the float, they roared in laughter. “This ragged float also joins the ‘Tour of the Imperial City’, won’t it be the laughingstock of the people?” they said. As the float got near, Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly and he was shocked! He saw a large man on the cart, with his long yellow hair reaching his shoulder. His eyes were closed, and he was sitting on a couch. What character did he play if not Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun? Next to him stood a good-looking young woman wearing green, she had a teacup in her hands, as if she was attentively serving the man. Although her appearance was inferior to Zhou Zhiruo’s beauty, her clothing and adornments were exactly the same as the ones she was wearing at the Wan An Temple Pagoda.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said in a low voice, “That girl looks like you.”

“Hmmp,” Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but did not say anything. Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw her complexion went pale, while her chest was heaving; he knew she was enraged. Thereupon he reached out to hold her right hand; while not fully understanding the intention behind this float.

The next float was still depicting the Xie Xun – Zhou Zhiruo story. The actor playing Zhou Zhiruo giggled while walking around toward the corner, then ‘she’ stretched out two fingers and suddenly struck ‘Xie Xun’s back with all ‘her’

might. “Ah!” the fake ‘Xie Xun’ exclaimed loudly, then collapsed to the couch. ‘Zhou Zhiruo’ lifted her foot to step on him, and then raised her sword ready to kill. The spectators broke in loud cheer, “Good! Good! Kill him!”

The third float of this ‘Xie Xun - Zhou Zhiruo’ theme depicted six or seven men dressed as beggars capturing the ‘Xie Xun’ and ‘Zhou Zhiruo’.

By this time all doubts were gone from Zhang Wuji’s mind; he knew these three floats were built by Zhao Min. Expecting Zhou Zhiruo and him to come to Dadu, she arranged for these floats to humiliate Zhou Zhiruo. He stooped down to pick several small pebbles from the ground, and lightly flicked them with his middle finger. ‘Swish, swish!’ the right eyes of the pair of horses pulling the third float were blinded. The pebbles entered the horses’ brains. With long neigh, those horses fell down to the ground, dead. The float flipped over and the actors rolled down to the ground. The street was thrown into chaos.

Zhao Zhiruo bit her lower lip and said quietly, “This witch insulted me this way, I ... I ...” Speaking to this point, her voice turned into sobs.

Zhang Wuji felt her hand was ice-cold, her body trembled; hastily he tried to assure her, “Zhiruo, this little bitch [orig. ‘muddy egg’] can think of hundreds of weird tricks, don’t pay her any attention. As long as I know your sincerity, even if others sow dissension, how is it possible for me to believe them?”

“Ah, I remember,” Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, “That day Yifu was fine, before he suddenly convulsed and fell down to the floor, and then he started talking deliriously. Could it be ... could it be that at that time this witch was hiding in that inn

and she shot a secret projectile toward Yifu's back?"

Zhang Wuji pondered for a moment before saying, "If she made her move then, she might still have enough time to make it to the Mi Le Temple in time. But based on her martial art skill, I don't think she could evade Yifu's detection. I am leaning more toward the Xuanming Elders who attacked him."

While they were talking, the Mongolian soldiers had already pushed the people back and cleared up the street from the dead horses, so that the procession of floats could continue. Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo's minds were still occupied by the recent events and they did not have any interest in watching the subsequent floats.

After the last float passed by, they heard intermittent sound of Buddhist monks chanting, followed by the appearance of row after row of foreign monks in red kasaya. After these monks, they heard the tinkling of iron armor, as two thousands 'Yu Lin Jun' [special force, the Emperor's personal bodyguards] troops, in full armor, each one with a lance in his hand, made their appearance, followed by three thousand archers.

After the archers, incense smoke rose up to the sky, as one by one the idols were carried on sedan chairs by porters wearing embroidered clothes; from the Tu Di [Earth God], Cheng Huang [deity in Chinese mythology], Ling Guan [lit. spirit of government official - don't know the exact translation], Wei Tuo [Celestial Guardian], Cai Shen [God of Wealth]. [Translator's note: there is one more idol mentioned, but my copy missed one character] A lot of people muttered their prayers, while some went down on their knees to worship.

These idols were followed by guards of honor, carrying ceremonial articles like golden gourd, golden hammer and so on. Next, came feathered fans and jeweled parasols in pairs. The crowd called out, "The Emperor is here! The Emperor is here!" as from a distant came a large sedan chair covered in yellow silk, carried by thirty-two 'shi wei' [This is also personal bodyguards of the Emperor. Perhaps someone out there can explain the difference between Shi Wei and Yu Lin Jun] wearing embroidered clothes.

Zhang Wuji focused his attention to see the Mongolian Emperor. He noticed that the Emperor's countenance was thin, pallid, and dispirited. In just one glance it was obvious that he indulged in wine. The Crown Prince rode a horse next to the sedan chair. Contrary to his expectations, the Crown Prince actually showed a heroic spirit. He had a gilded long bow, inlaid with jade, on his shoulder; truly fit the image of a Mongolian young hero.

"Jiaozhu," Han Lin'er whispered on Zhang Wuji's ear, "Let subordinate make an assault, with a stab of my blade I can assassinate the Tartar Emperor, and thus rid the common people of one big evil."

"No, you can't go!" Zhang Wuji said, "The Tartar Emperor is surrounded by martial art masters as his guards. If we are going to do it, I am the one who must go."

"That is inappropriate," suddenly the man standing on Zhang Wuji's left opened his mouth, "Replacing one tyrant with another, I have never seen it work."

Zhang Wuji, Han Lin'er and Zhou Zhiruo were startled; they turned to see this man, and saw he was about fifty years of age, dressed like a medicine peddler, carrying a medicine sack on his back, his right hand held a tiger-head stick. That

man turned his thumb up and put his hand in front of his chest, making a Ming Cult's blazing fire signal, and said in a low voice, "Peng Yingyu pays his respects to Jiaozhu. Jiaozhu is well, I am very happy."

"Ah, you are Peng ..." Zhang Wuji was very happy. It turned out that man was Peng Yingyu. His disguise was so ingenious that although he had been standing next to them for a long time, Zhang Wuji and the others did not have the slightest idea of his real identity.

In a low voice Peng Yingyu said, "This is not a good place to talk. The Tartar Emperor must not be killed." Zhang Wuji was aware of his wisdom and knowledge, therefore, he simply nodded and did not ask anymore questions. He only reached out to grab Peng Yingyu's left hand and gently shook it a few times.

In the meantime, the Emperor and the Crown Prince were followed by three thousand armored Yu Lin Jun. After them, the tens of thousands of crowds went down the street to watch the festivities. "Let us go see the Empress, let us go see the Princess," they said to each other while heading westward.

"Let us also go and see," Zhou Zhiruo said. The four of them mingled with the crowd until they arrived outside the 'Yu De Dian' [Jade Virtue Palace]. They saw that seven beautifully decorated raised platforms erected outside the Palace. The platforms were surrounded by the Yu Lin Jun holding rattan sticks to prevent the people from coming too close. Although it was very crowded, Zhang Wuji and the others, four people, managed to squeeze their way through by gently pushing forward and before long they had reached at the front of the platforms.

The Emperor sat on the highest platform, with the two Empresses on either side of him. The Empresses were middle-age fat women, bundled inside robes inlaid with pearls, jade and precious jewels. Needless to say, they glittered with brilliant lights. On their heads, they wore ridiculously strange-looking tall crowns. The Crown Prince sat on the platform to the left of the Emperor, while on the right platform sat a young woman about twenty or so, wearing embroidered gown. She must be the Princess.

Zhang Wuji's eyes scanned the rest of the platforms; he saw that on the second platform on the left sat a young woman wearing sable fur coat, with a pearl necklace on her neck. Her smile was captivating, her eyes dreamy. It was none other than Zhao Min. On this same platform sat a long-bearded Prince with a majestic expression. He was Zhao Min's father, the Ruyang Prince, Khakan Timur. Zhao Min's brother, Kuku Timur, was pacing back and forth on the platform, with eyes like an eagle and steps like a tiger. He looked particularly imposing.

By this time the foreign monks were performing the 'Tian Mo Da Zhen' [Heaven and Devil Great Formation]. Five hundred monks with Buddhist religious articles in their hands circled around, to the left and to the right, jumping high and stooping low; the changes and variations were marvelously strange. The crowd broke into cheers and applause; everybody sighed in admiration.

Zhou Zhiruo kept her gaze on Zhao Min for half a day. Finally, she sighed and said, "Let's go home!" The four of them squeezed their way out and returned to the inn.

Peng Yingyu paid his respects properly toward Zhang Wuji, and then they both recounted what happened since they parted. Zhang Wuji asked whether he heard any news about

Xie Xun. Peng Yingyu had just arrived at Dadu from the Huai Si River area; he did not even know that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains. He told the accomplishments of Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others over the past year. They besieged and captured towns; they performed outstanding military successes and lifted the Ming Cult's prestige high.

"Peng Da Shi [lit. grand/great master, also used to refer a Buddhist Monk, Reverend]," Han Lin'er said, "Just now if we attacked the platform, with one knife we could chop that Tatar Emperor; why did you let him go?"

Peng Yingyu shook his head, "This Emperor is a stupid tyrant and he is precisely our biggest helper. How can we kill him?" he said.

Han Lin'er was baffled. "The Tatar Emperor is a stupid tyrant; he has caused endless misery to the common people. How can he be our biggest helper?" he asked.

"Han Xiongdi [brother Han], you don't understand," Peng Yingyu said, "The Tatar Emperor appointed foreign monks for official businesses, and thus muddling the government; he also ordered the people to build a new road by excavating the Yellow River, tiring the people and squandering the resources, making the people angry and causing them to resent him. In recent years we managed to route the Tatars completely. Do you think that was because our ragtag troop is really superior of the Mongolian crack troops? It was because this muddle-headed Emperor did not use good officers. The Ruyang Prince is very capable of leading the troops. He managed to take things under control in everywhere the Tatar Emperor sent him to quench rebellion. The Emperor is afraid that if he rendered too many services, he would usurp the throne. Therefore, he continually

reduces his authority, and dispatches some braggarts, good-for-nothing generals to lead the troops. As the Mongolian army fought the battle, these bastard generals can only lead them to defeat. Tell me, don't you think this Tatar Emperor is our biggest helper?"

Zhang Wuji and the others nodded their heads in agreement. Peng Yingyu continued, "If we killed this Tatar Emperor, the Crown Prince would rise to the throne. Looking at his appearance, the Crown Prince is not someone easy to deal with. Granted, as the new Emperor, he might lack experience, but he is certainly better than his muddle-headed father. It would be really bad if he appoints veteran generals seasoned in battles to fight us."

Zhang Wuji said, "It's good that Da Shi promptly warned us, otherwise, we might act rashly today and spoil an important matter."

Han Lin'er repeatedly slapped his own mouth while swearing, "I deserve to die! I deserve to die! Later on, don't you dare to talk rubbish and propose stupid ideas!" Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Peng Yingyu laughed at his silliness.

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu, you hold a very important role, you bear the heavy responsibility of driving the invaders away and recapture our land; you must not brave unnecessarily danger. Subordinate noticed that among the guards who surrounded the Emperor, the number of masters is truly not a few. Although Jiaozhu is divinely brave and skilled, ultimately you will be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. If you fail, what good will it bring?"

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "I receive Da Shi's invaluable advice."

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "What Peng Da Shi said was absolutely right; how can you recklessly brave danger? Wait until our great undertaking is accomplished, then the one sits on this dragon-chair platform will be you, Zhang Jiaozhu."

Han Lin'er clapped his hands; he said, "That time, Jiaozhu will be the Emperor, Miss Zhou will be the Empress, Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary Yang] and Peng Da Shi [different 'shi'] will be the Left and Right Prime Ministers. Now, that will be good!"

Zhou Zhiruo's cheeks blushed, she bashfully lowered her head, but the corner of her eyes revealed that she was extremely happy.

Zhang Wuji repeatedly shook his hands. "Han Xiongdi," he said, "You cannot say such thing again. Our Cult's goal is to save the common people under the Heaven from the fire and the water. The goal accomplished, we retire. Don't be greedy of riches and honor. That is the character of upright and real men."

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu possesses a strong aspiration that not many people will be able to reach. It's just that by that time, you may not necessarily be able to refuse the yellow robe [Translator's note: only Emperor could wear yellow robe at that time]. During the Chen Qiao military revolt [960AD, the founding of Song Dynasty], did Zhao Kuangyin [given name of the first Emperor of the Song, the Song Taizu] think of becoming the Emperor?"

"No, no!" Zhang Wuji kept saying, "If I have the least bit of desire to be the Emperor, let the Heaven punish me and the Earth swallow me, let me die a wretched death."

Listening to his determination, Zhou Zhiruo's expression changed slightly, she turned her gaze outside the window and no longer said anything.

Four people talked a bit more, and then after dinner, Zhang Wuji said, "Peng Da Shi and I are going out to inquire information about Yifu." He thought that Han Lin'er was hot-tempered, if he saw any injustice, he would certainly not hesitate to let his fists do the talking and thus inviting some unwanted disaster; thereupon he said, "Han Xiongdi, you and Zhiruo better stay in the inn tonight. Have a good rest."

"Yes," Han Lin'er said, "Jiaozhu, please be careful!"

Zhang Wuji and Peng Yingyu made an agreement right away that one of them would go to the west, and the other to the east. They would meet again at the inn to discuss their findings.

Zhang Wuji went out the inn heading west. Along the way he heard the people were still talking about the 'Great Tour of the Imperial City' that morning. He heard somebody was saying, "The Ming Cult is staging a rebellion in the south. Today the Guardian Bodhisattva of the Emperor was brought out in front of the people. Looks like those rebels will be crushed soon." Another man argued, "The Ming Cult is under the blessing and protection of Mi Le Pu Sa [Maitreya Bodhisattva]; looks like the Guardian Bodhisattva of the Emperor will have a battle against the Mi Le Pu Sa." Yet another man commented, "The excavation of the Yellow River has unearthed a stone figure with one eye. There are two lines of characters on the back of that figure: 'Do not say that because the stone figure only has one eye, it is incapable of provoking the Yellow River world.' This has caused some speculations that some things simply cannot be forced." [Translator's note: I am not sure about the last

man's comment.]

Zhang Wuji paid no attention to all these unfounded comments by simple people; he wandered aimlessly until the path he took started to get quieter. Suddenly he looked up and realized that he had reached the small inn where he had a drink with Zhao Min the other day. He was startled and mused, "How did I get here? Could it be that in my heart I still cannot let her go?"

He saw that the door of the inn was ajar, and noticed that it was very quiet inside, apparently there was no guest drinking inside that night. He hesitated for a moment then he pushed the door open and walked in. He saw the attendant was dozing off on the counter table. On a table toward the corner, there was a lone candle flickering weakly in the dark. Next to the candle sat a guest. This table was precisely the table they used both times Zhao Min and he had a drink. Other than this single patron, there was nobody else in sight.

As that guest heard the footsteps approaching, the guest stood up. The candlelight swayed and shone on that person's face. To Zhang Wuji's surprise, that person was Zhao Min.

Neither of them expected to see the other. "Ah!" they both exclaimed in shock. "You ..." in a low voice Zhao Min said, "Why are you here?" Her voice trembled, revealing her exceedingly excited heart.

Zhang Wuji replied, "I was passing through, and came in to take a look. I don't expect ..." while talking, he walked toward her table, and saw that there was another set of cup and chopsticks on the seat opposite hers, thereupon he asked, "Are you expecting someone?"

Zhao Min blushed, "No," she said, "It was because twice we had a drink here; you were sitting over there, so ... so I told the attendant to set another set of cup and chopsticks."

Zhang Wuji's heart was touched. He also noticed that the four dishes of food and wine on the table was exactly the same as the food and wine Zhao Min prepared the first time she invited him over. From the bottom of his heart he knew the depth of Zhao Min's feeling; he could not stop himself from reaching out to grab her hands in his. "Miss Zhao!" he said, his voice shaky.

"I hate it," Zhao Min gloomily said, "I hate it that I was born to a Mongolian Prince family, and become your enemy ..."

Suddenly, from outside the window came two 'hey, hey' cold laugh sounds, followed by something flew in. 'Slap!' that thing extinguished the candle on the table, that the room suddenly turned dark.

As they heard the sneer, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min knew it was Zhou Zhiruo. While they were still at a loss, they heard indistinct footsteps on the roof and Zhou Zhiruo was gone like a wind.

"You are engaged to her, aren't you?" in a low voice Zhao Min asked.

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I shouldn't conceal the truth from you."

"I was hiding behind the tree that day," Zhao Min said, "I heard your sweet words to her. I wished I could die immediately, I wish I have never been born in this world. That day I laughed coldly twice, and today she paid me back by laughing coldly twice. But ... but you have not even said

half a word to make me happy yet.”

“Miss Zhao,” Zhang Wuji said apologetically, “I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t even see you. I have my people to think about, I shouldn’t make you upset. You are a golden-branch-and-jade-leaf kind of person, from now on you should forget this village kid, farm boy like me.”

Zhao Min lifted his hand up and gently ran her finger over the scar on his hand. “This is where I bit you,” she said in a tender voice, “Even if your martial art skill were higher, your medical skill were better, you would still not able to take this scar away. If you cannot get rid of the scar on your own hand, how can you take the scar in my heart away?” She wrapped her arms around Zhang Wuji’s neck, and then planted a deep kiss on his lips.

Zhang Wuji’s mind was chaotic to suddenly feel cherry soft lips on his, and sweet fragrance assaulting his nostrils. Suddenly Zhao Min bit his upper lip as hard as she could, until he was bleeding. And then she pushed his shoulder away from her as she turned around and escaped from the window, while calling out, “You are a pervert little thief! I hate you! I hate you ...!”
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As Zhang Wuji and Peng Yingyu left the inn, Han Lin’er said to Zhou Zhiruo, “Miss Zhou, you’d better go to bed earlier tonight.” Without daring to say anything else, he stood up and left the room.

“Han Dage [big brother Han,” Zhou Zhiruo smiled, “Are you afraid of me? You are not willing to be alone with me even for a second.”

Han Lin'er blushed profusely. "No, no," he hastily said, but his steps were getting faster. He quickly entered his own room, closed the door behind him, and bolted it; while his heart was thumping madly. Trying to calm himself, he reclined on the 'kang' [heatable brick bed common in northern China], while thinking of Zhao Zhiruo's tender and beautiful, simple yet elegant, countenance, and her soft but warm voice. He mused, "In the future, Miss Zhou will become Madame Jiaozhu. I will diligently follow Jiaozhu's orders and will stake everything to set up a few merits. I will make Miss Zhou happy, and then she will say, 'Han Dage, really, you troubled yourself too much to do this!' When that happens, then my, Han Lin'er's, life will not be in vain." His daydream made him smile, and he drifted off to sleep.

He slept until midnight, and was awakened by some light tapping on his door. Han Lin'er sat up with a start and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me," he heard Zhou Zhiruo's voice outside the door, "Please open the door, I need to talk to you."

"Yes, yes," Han Lin'er said. He went to the door barefooted, pulled the latch open, then quickly turned around to light the candle. He saw that Zhou Zhiruo's eyes were red and puffy, her expression looked greatly different. Han Lin'er was scared. "Miss Zhou, you ... you ..." he stammered, without able to continue whatever he was going to say. Suddenly he got an idea; he dashed out the room while saying, "I'll fetch some water for you to wash your face."

A short moment later, he returned with a washbasin in his hands, still barefooted. Zhou Zhiruo gave him a mournful smile. She sat on the table, supporting her chin with her hand, staring blankly at the candle.

“You ... please wash your face,” Han Lin’er said.

Zhou Zhiruo did not say a single word; she merely shook her head and suddenly tears start flowing down. In his fright, Han Lin’er was stumped. He relaxed his hands while still standing; wondering why she was so upset, and dying to know what it was she wanted to tell him.

The two of them maintained the silence for a long time. Suddenly a light ‘crack’ was heard as the wax snapped off the candle. Zhou Zhiruo trembled as if she had just awakened from a sleep. “Mmm,” she mumbled softly then she stood up to leave.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said loudly, “Who offended you? I, the man surnamed Han will take my dagger to him. Even if I have to die, I will make a few holes on his body. Please tell me!” Zhou Zhiruo only shook her head sadly, and then returned to her room.

From the time she entered his room, Zhou Zhiruo only sat quietly for a long time. It appeared that she had wanted to unburden herself from her troubled mind; but all along she did not utter a single word, so that a hot tempered and rash man like Han Lin’er can only scratch his head in confusion. As she left, he stood absentmindedly, occasionally curling his fist to hit his own head. After thinking for a while without finding anything, he heard ‘bang, bang, bang!’ three times from a distance, and he thought, “Why haven’t Jiaozhu and Peng Da Shi come back yet?” Since there was nothing else he could do, he laid down on the ‘kang’ again to sleep.

While he was dozing off, suddenly he heard a couple of loud noises, as if a chair was knocked down to the floor, coming from the room to his east; it was the room where Zhou Zhiruo slept. In his anxiety, Han Lin’er leaped up from his

bed and ran toward that room.

Under the moonlight he saw a dark shadow inside that eastern room, swaying lightly, as if it was hanging in the air. Han Lin'er was shocked. "Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou!" he called out, while stretching out his hand to push the door, but it was bolted from inside. Using all his strength he pushed the door with his shoulder and the bolt snapped. Rushing into the room, he struck the flint to light the candle first, and then turned around to see Zhou Zhiruo's feet which were hanging in the air, while a rope was wrapped around her neck, and the other end of the rope was tied onto the beam.

Han Lin'er felt as if his soul was about to leave his body. Hastily he jumped up to pull the rope from the beam, and then laid Zhou Zhiruo on the bed. He felt for her breathe and luckily she was still breathing.

"Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou," he called in a very loud voice, "You ... why didn't you look at the bright side? Why did you ... why ..."

Suddenly he heard someone from outside the door calling out, "Han Dage, what is it?" A man walked in, it was Zhang Wuji.

As Zhang Wuji saw what happened, he felt as if a lightning bolt had just struck him. With trembling hands he broke off the rope around Zhou Zhiruo's neck, and then he felt her chest and found that her heart was still beating. "She is all right," he happily said, "I can save her." Reaching down toward her back and lower abdomen, he massaged her acupoints, while transmitting the Jiu Yang divine energy from the palms of his hands. After one round, 'Wah!' Zhou Zhiruo regained her consciousness and started to cry.

“Good, very good!” Han Lin’er exclaimed in exultation, “Miss Zhou is alive!”

Zhou Zhiruo opened her eyes and as she saw Zhang Wuji, she cried again, “Why do you care about me? Let me die in peace.” Suddenly she noticed Zhang Wuji’s upper lip was still bleeding, with some fine tooth marks on it. She could not suppress her fury; she raised her hand and heavily slapped Zhang Wuji’s face left and right.

Han Lin’er was flabbergasted; how could anybody beat the Cult Leader? But in his eyes, Zhou Zhiruo was like an immortal; so he was confused and did not know what to do. Right that moment, someone gently tapped his shoulder twice. Han Lin’er turned his head and saw Peng Yingyu. In his delight he said, “Peng Da Shi, you’re back! Quick, quickly advise Miss Zhou.”

Peng Yingyu laughed, “Advise what?” Toward Zhang Wuji he said, “Reporting to Jiaozhu: I did not find any information regarding Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-haired lion king].”

“Hmm,” Zhang Wuji mumbled. He looked awkward.

“Han Xiongdi,” Peng Yingyu said, “Let’s go and take a walk outside.”

“No, no, we can’t,” Han Lin’er replied, “They are going to fight. Miss Zhou is certainly not Jiaozhu’s match.”

Peng Yingyu laughed out loud, “Silly brother!” he said, “Do you think even if the two of us are ganging up with Miss Zhou, we can beat Jiaozhu? I’ll say Jiaozhu is not Miss Zhou’s match.” He winked at Han Lin’er, and pulled his hand out of the room. Han Lin’er was still trying to turn his head, his face showed a deep concern. Zhou Zhiruo could not help but try

to stifle her laugh, and then threw herself on the bed and wept again.

Zhang Wuji sat on the edge of the bed, gently tapped her shoulder and said in a tender voice, "Zhiruo, I did not have any appointment to meet her; it was truly an incidental meeting."

Zhou Zhiruo randomly kicked her feet, while sobbing, "I don't believe you, I don't believe you. Whatever lies you are saying, don't tell me to believe you."

Zhang Wuji sighed, "'When Zhou Gong feared the days of rumor, Wang Mang enjoyed being praised as a polite and modest scholar,'" he quoted, "The matters of this world is so easy to be misunderstood ..."

Zhou Zhiruo snorted and sat up, "That Junzhu Niangniang [princess] uses those verses to insult me, yet you consider it so poetic that you memorize it in your heart. Look at your lip, aren't you ashamed? Where is your dignity?" Speaking to this point, she could not restrain her own cheeks from blushing.

Zhang Wuji thought that whatever he said, the incident today was very difficult to debate. Besides, he had determined to marry Zhou Zhiruo and grow old together. So the only thing he could do was suppress his emotions, and wish that this incident would eventually fade away from her memory as well. Under the candle light, he saw her pretty face was slightly red, with a deep rope mark around her neck, causing the neck swell on both sides. He thought that if Han Lin'er had been late in realizing what was going on and not rescued her, by the time he returned to the inn, she would have been dead, and no matter what kind of power he had, he would hate himself. Thinking of this, he was both ashamed and felt compassion toward her. He reached out to

embrace her and kissed her cherry-red lips.

Zhou Zhiruo turned her head to avoid his kiss, and indignantly said, "You have committed dirty things with others, and come here to annoy me. Do you think you can take advantage of me?"

Zhang Wuji tightened his embrace so that she was unable to free herself, and then he deeply kissed her lips again. Because she could not struggle free, in the end Zhou Zhiruo's heart softened. Zhang Wuji thought that although they were engaged, they were not married yet. Being together in a room deep into the night, unavoidably some people would find it unacceptable. Besides, it would not be good in the eyes of Peng Yingyu, Han Lin'er and the others. Thereupon he let her go and said, "Zhiruo, take a good rest. We'll talk about it tomorrow. If I lied to you and went to see Miss Zhao, although you chop me with a thousand knives and cut me into ten thousand pieces, I will die without any regret."

Zhou Zhiruo's face blushed, her chest was heaving. Taking a deep breath, she said, "What nonsense are you talking about? You know that I will never chop you with a thousand knives and cut you into ten thousand pieces."

Zhang Wuji laughed. "You can always chop my both legs, what do you think?" he said.

Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head, beads of tears streaming down like rain. Zhang Wuji felt bad to walk out the room, he returned to her side, wrapped his arms around her shoulder and gently said, "What makes you sad?"

Zhou Zhiruo did not answer, but she kept crying. Zhang Wuji asked her again and again, but to his surprise, the more

he asked, the sadder she was. Zhang Wuji cursed himself and swore, saying that he was a heartless and ungrateful man. Zhou Zhiruo covered her face with her hands and said, "I blame my own cruel fate; I am not blaming you."

"Everybody is suffering right now," Zhang Wuji said, "The Tatars suppress the people of the Central Plains; everybody lives in suffering and great difficulty. Later on, when we get married and also have driven out the Tatars, then we will live a happy life and not suffer anymore."

Zhou Zhiruo raised her head. "Wuji Gege," she said, "I know you are being sincere to me. It's just that that little witch Zhao Min is trying to seduce you, it's not that you are of a double-minded person [orig. 'three-heart two-intention']. Only ... only she is too smart, her martial art skill is superior, her beauty, her power, everything in her is ten times better than I am. After all is said and done, I simply cannot beat her. It is better for me to die than to live a broken-hearted life. Who would have thought that that fool Han Lin'er would revived me. I have tried to die once, I don't have the courage to try again. I ... I want to be like Shifu, I want to shave my head and become a Buddhist Nun. Ay, in the end, our Emei Pai's Zhang Men [Sect Leader] is not a family woman."

"You are always anxious," Zhang Wuji said, "Let's do this: tomorrow, we are leaving for the Huai Si River, we will get married over there."

"We haven't found Yifu," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Besides, you haven't destroyed the Barbarians, how can you get married? In the end ... in the end we can't get married yet." While saying that, tears started to flow again.

"Naturally we must intensify the search for Yifu," Zhang Wuji

said, "But it will be a lot easier for us to find information if we are among our brethren. As for driving the Tatars away, nobody can tell when would that be. Are you saying that we should wait until we become 'lao gong gong' [old man or grandfather] and 'lao po po' [old woman, also grandmother] before we can bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married? A pair of an old man and an old woman getting married is not strange, but we certainly can't get any children, then the Zhang family of mine will die without any heir."

Zhou Zhiruo blushed and covered up her mouth. "An honest and naïve person like you, I wonder where did you learn to talk garrulously like that?" It was as if the anxiety clouds and the miserable fog in the sky were lifted up and scattered away with their laughter.

Early morning the next day, Zhang Wuji requested Peng Yingyu to stay in Dadu for three more days to inquire about any news on Xie Xun; while he took Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er heading south toward the Huai Si River area. When they entered Shandong's border, they saw a large group of defeated Mongolian army, dragging their armor and losing their helmets, swarm in. Seeing the condition of these defeated soldiers, Zhang Wuji and the others avoided them by taking a detour. Later on, they saw a lone soldier fall behind, they captured and interrogated him, and found out that in Huaibei, Zhu Yuanzhang had repeatedly won several big battles and completely routed the Yuan army.

The three of them were unable to restrain their delight; they picked up their speed and reached the Lu Wan [Anhui province] boundary, which had fallen under the Ming Cult's rebel army [orig. 'yi4 jun1' - justice/righteous army] territory. Someone in the rebel army recognized Han Lin'er and quickly reported to the general mansion. As the three of

them approach Haozhou, Han Shantong, leading Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, Deng Yu, Tang He, all the senior generals, were already out welcoming them within thirty 'li's [about 15 km] of the city limit. It was their first meeting after a long separation, so everybody was very happy. As Han Shantong learned about Han Lin'er being captured by the Beggar Clan and how their Cult Leader battled his captors to rescue him, he did not cease from expressing his gratitude. Amidst the clamoring gongs and drums, and dazzling armored entourage, they entered the city of Haozhou.

Zhou Zhiruo rode a horse right behind Zhang Wuji. She looked to the left and glanced to the right, and thought that although this parade was not as glamorous as the Emperor and Empress' 'Tour of the Imperial City', she was quite pleased with it.

Zhang Wuji rested inside the city for a few days. As Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang, Priest Tieguan ['iron hat'], Shuo Bude, Zhou Dian, and all leaders of the Five-Element Flags received the news about his arrival, they all came from all over the country. Zhang Wuji told them that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains; and how he was captured by the Beggar Clan but went missing later on. He told them everything related to this incident.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others discussed this matter over and over again, but nobody was able to offer any explanation. Fan Yao said, "The origin of that lady in yellow is unknown, but perhaps she holds the key to the information on Xie Xiong's [brother Xie] whereabouts."

Nobody had ever heard about that in the Wulin world there existed this lady in yellow. They could not offer anything

except exhorting Zhang Wuji not to worry. "Judging from her speech and conduct, this lady in yellow does not hold any ill intention," they said, "If Jin Mao Shi Wang has fallen into her hands surely he won't come into any harm. Perhaps all this woman wants is some information on the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji was still feeling an inexplicable concern in his heart, but he could not do anything except dispatch the Five-Element Flags to go everywhere to find information.

The next day Peng Yingyu arrived from Dadu; he also said that he could not find any news about Xie Xun.

Although the Ming Cult's rebel army had achieved great victory everywhere, the casualties in their side were also very serious. Hereafter they would be busy in the next two, three months to reorganize their troops and recruit new soldiers; hence, they were unable to engage the Yuan army in a large-scale battle for the time being.

Peng Yingyu knew that Zhou Zhiruo attempted suicide that night. Although he was unclear of the real reason behind it, he speculated that it had something to do with jealousy between the two. Fan Yao and the others were also aware of Zhang Wuji's unusual relationship with Zhao Min. If the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult took a Mongolian princess as his wife, the threat facing their great undertaking of resisting the Yuan would not be small. Since currently there wasn't any important matter at hand, they all agreed to urge Zhang Wuji to conclude his marriage with Zhou Zhiruo. Since Zhang Wuji had had a talk with Zhou Zhiruo beforehand, he readily agreed. Yang Xiao immediately decided that the fifteenth day of the third month would be an auspicious day.

The entire Ming Cult was jubilant; straightaway they busied themselves making preparation for their Jiaozhu's wedding.

By this time, the Ming Cult's name had shaken the world. To the east, Han Shantong repeatedly scored major victories around the Huai Si River area. To the west, Xu Shouhui also defeated the Yuan army again and again around the northern Hubei and southern Henan. As the big news of the Cult Leader's marriage spread out, the Wulin world's figures' congratulatory gifts came flooding in like a tidal wave of the river.

Kunlun, Kongtong, and various other Sects were originally in enmity with the Ming Cult. However, first, Zhang Wuji had rescued them from the Dadu's Wan An Temple, and thus each Sect felt indebted to him; second, Zhou Zhiruo was the Sect Leader of Emei, so that each Sect Leader was obligated to send their representative to deliver their gift. Kongtong Five Elders' [Kongtong Wu Lao] gift was especially lavish.

The gift from Zhang Sanfeng consisted of calligraphy of four characters, 'Jia Er Jia Fu' [lit. excellent son (husband), excellent woman (wife)], and his own writing of the 'Tai Ji Quan Jing' [Taiji Fist Manual], which were delivered by Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and Yin Liting, three of his chief disciples. By this time, Yin Liting had already married Yang Buhui, who also came to Haozhou.

Zhang Wuji welcomed her with a big smile on his face. "Liu Shi Shen [sixth martial aunt]!" he called out loudly. Yang Buhui blushed profusely. She pulled his hand away to reminisce about the past; with a heart full of joy and gratefulness.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu had not given up on their wicked scheme and would take this opportunity to strike. Thereupon he sent Wei Yixiao as his envoy to convey his gratitude to Wudang Mountain. He quietly told Wei Yixiao in detail how Song Qingshu had killed

Mo Shenggu, and how he had conspired to harm Zhang Sanfeng. He asked that after Wei Yixiao paid his respects to Zhang Sanfeng, to collaborate with Yu Daiyan and Zhang Songxi in guarding against Chen Youliang's evil plan; and that he should wait until Song Yuanqiao and the others return to Wudang before he leaves.

Wei Yixiao spitefully said, "Following Jiaozhu's order, Wei Yixiao does not dare to suck others' blood; but this time, if I ever come across those two traitors, I must suck their blood dry."

Zhang Wuji hastily said, "About that Chen Youliang, I don't care if Wei Xiong [brother Wei] get rid of him. But Song Qingshu is my Song Da Shibo's only beloved son, he is also Wudang Pai's future Sect Leader. Besides, we should let Wudang clean up their own school. We must avoid hurting my Song Da Shibo's feelings." Wei Yixiao complied and left immediately.

By the tenth of the third month, the heroines of Emei arrived at Haozhou bringing gifts. Ding Minjun sent her gift, but she did not personally come.

When the fifteenth of the third month came, everybody from the Ming Cult, from top to bottom, were wearing new clothes. The wedding ceremony was to be held at the mansion belonging to the richest man in Haozhou. The reception hall was adorned with hanging lanterns and colorful embroidered banners of congratulations. Zhang Sanfeng's calligraphy, 'Jia Er Jia Fu' was hung in the middle.

Yin Tianzheng presided over the groom's family, while Chang Yuchun presided over the bride's side. Priest Tieguan was in charge of Haozhou's security; he deployed the Cult disciples to patrol around town, to guard against the enemy

mingled in and caused trouble. Tang He stationed his army of elite troops to guard the city's perimeter.

That morning, the delegations from Shaolin Pai and Huashan Pai also arrived with their gifts.

When the ninth hour [between 3 – 5 pm] came, the wedding ceremony started. Cannons were fired repeatedly. The guests flooded the reception hall. Upon the command of Master of Ceremony, Song Yuanqiao and Yin Yewang walked Zhang Wuji into the hall. The string and woodwind ensemble started to play; the mood was bright.

Accompanied by eight of Emei Pai's young heroines, Zhou Zhiruo willowy and elegantly stepped into the hall. Zhou Zhiruo was wearing red embroidered dress, with phoenix crown and red-cloud cape on her head, and red veil covered her face. The male on the left and the female on the right, the bride and the groom stood side by side.

"Bow to the Heaven!" the Master of Ceremony shouted.

Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo were about to kneel down on the red-felt rug when suddenly from outside the main gate someone shouted, "Hold it!" A dark green shadow flashed, and a young woman in dark green clothes stood in the middle of the hall, smiling softly; it was none other than Zhao Min.

As the crowd saw that it was her, they exclaimed in surprise. Many masters from Ming Cult and various Sects had suffered under her hands; they did not expect her to be as bold as to enter this dangerous place alone. The hot-tempered among them were ready to pounce forward.

"Hold it!" Yang Xiao spread out his arms and shouted. To the

guests he said, "Today is our humble Cult's Jiaozhu and the Emei Pai's Zhang Men's [Sect Leader] day of happiness. Since Miss Zhao has come to join us in this celebration, she is also our honored guest. Therefore, I am asking everybody to look at Emei Pai and Ming Cult's humble faces and willing set aside the old grudges temporarily; and thus not to treat Miss Zhao impolitely."

He cast a meaningful glance toward Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu. They understood his intention. Circling to the rear of the hall, they went outside to investigate, to observe how many martial art masters Zhao Min took with her.

To Zhao Min he said, "Miss Zhao, please have a seat over here and watch the ceremony. Later on I will salute you with three cups of insipid wine."

Zhao Min smiled slightly and said, "I have something I want to say to Zhang Jiaozhu. I will leave as soon as I am finished. I will come back later to accept your hospitality."

"Whatever it is that Miss Zhao wants to say, it won't be too late to wait after the ceremony is over," Yang Xiao said.

"After the ceremony, it will be too late," Zhao Min said.

Yang Xiao and Fan Yao exchanged a look, knowing that she had come today to deliberately create trouble. Whatever it was, they must prevent it at any cost, so as to avoid disruption of the ceremony, embarrassment, and to displease the guests.

Yang Xiao took two steps forward and said, "As your host today, we have exhausted our propriety. Miss Zhao is asking us to act harshly." He had decided that if Zhao Min kept making disturbance, he would swiftly seal her acupoints and

deal with her later.

“Ku Da Shi,” Zhao Min turned to Fan Yao, “Others are going to attack me, are you going to help me or not?”

Fan Yao knitted his brows and said, “Junzhu [princess], in the matters of this world, 80, 90% of them do not happen according to one’s wishes. Since we have come to this, you should not force me to do anything.”

Zhao Min said, “I want to force you.” Turning toward Zhang Wuji she said, “Zhang Wuji, you are the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, as a real man, will you or will you not do what you have promised?”

Ever since he saw Zhao Min arrive, Zhang Wuji’s heart had been beating faster; he had hoped Yang Xiao would be able to deal with her nicely and had her leave without any struggle. Now that she directly asked him, he had no choice but answered, “Of course I will do what I promised.”

Zhao Min continued, “When I saved your Yu Sanshu [third martial uncle] and Yin Liushu’s [sixth uncle] lives, you promised to do three things I would ask you to do, did you or did you not?”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji replied, “You wanted me to borrow the Tulong Saber for you to look at, and not only you have looked at it, you have even stolen the precious saber.”

For the last several decades, the Jianghu people had been concerned about this ‘wu lin zhi zun’ [the most revered in the Wulin world] Tulong Saber’s whereabouts. Now that they suddenly heard that the Saber had fallen into Zhao Min’s hands, they were in an uproar.

“Only Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia knows into whose hands the Tulong Saber has fallen” Zhao Min said, “You can go and ask him personally.”

Actually, not too many Wulin people aware that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains; hearing her mentioning ‘The Golden-Haired Lion King’, they were thrown into commotion again.

“I am most concerned about my Yifu’s whereabouts these days,” Zhang Wuji said, “I hope Miss could shed some light on this matter.”

Zhao Min smiled mysteriously and said, “I have asked you to do three things for me, and you have promised to comply as long as the matter does not violate the Wulin world code of brotherhood or the chivalrous way. As of borrowing the Tulong Saber to look at, although I did not really look at it, but I have seen it after all; I cannot blame you if the precious Saber was stolen later. Just consider you have accomplished the first matter. Right now I have the second matter I’d like you to do. Zhang Wuji, in front of these heroes and warriors of the world, you cannot back off on your word.”

“What do you want me to do?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“Miss Zhao,” Yang Xiao interrupted, “Whatever it is you want our humble Cult’s Jiaozhu to do, since he has made a promise, as long as it does not violate the Wulin world’s way of chivalry, not only Zhang Jiaozhu will do it, our entire Cult, from top to bottom, will do our utmost to accomplish it. However, now is the time Zhang Jiaozhu and his new bride to bow to the Heaven and the Earth, other matter can wait, so please do not say too much and disturb the ceremony.”

By the last sentence, his tone was rather stern. But Zhao Min looked as if she did not care much about this Ming Cult’s Left

Emissary of the Brightness, whose prestige had shaken the Jianghu.

“My business is even more important,” Zhao Min languidly said, “It cannot be delayed even for a second.” Suddenly she took several steps toward Zhang Wuji, stood on her toes, and whispered in Zhang Wuji’s ear, “My second request is that you do not marry Miss Zhou today.”

“What?” Zhang Wuji was stunned.

Zhao Min said, “That was my second request. I’ll think about the third and let you know later.”

Although she was speaking in a low voice, it was loud enough so that Zhou Zhiruo, as well as those who stood nearby, such as Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the eight Emei female disciples, could hear her clearly. Everybody’s face was changed. The eight Emei disciples silently curled their fists inside their long sleeves; as soon as Zhao Min said anything else to disgrace the Emei Pai Sect Leader, they would make her suffer.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. “I can’t do it,” he said.

“So you decide not to honor your own word?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji replied, “We have stated explicitly that it cannot violate the ‘xia yi’ [code of brotherhood/chivalry]. Miss Zhou and I are engaged; if I do what you said, I will violate this ‘xia yi’.”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “If you marry her today, then you are unfilial and doing an injustice. Didn’t you see how your Yifu fell into others’ wicked plot during the ‘Tour of

the Imperial City' at Dadu?"

Zhang Wuji felt anger rising in his breast. "Miss Zhao," he said in a loud voice, "Today I respect you as my guest, therefore, I yield to you 30%. If you keep talking rubbish, don't blame me for offending you."

Zhao Min was unfazed. "So you have decided not to comply with my second request?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji remembered that with the honor she had as a princess, she did not hesitate to show her face in public [this is a literal translation of 'pao1 tou2 lou4 mian4', but I am sure the readers will understand what Jin Yong was saying], and ask him earnestly in the presence of all these heroes and warriors not to get married. It must be because of her feelings toward him. He could not restrain his heart from softening. "Miss Zhao," he said gently, "Since we have come to this, I am asking you ... I am asking you to understand. I, Zhang Wuji, am only an uncouth peasant; I am not worthy ... not worthy ..."

"All right," Zhao Min said, "Why don't you look; what is this?" Extending her right arm, she held out her hand in front of Zhang Wuji's face.

As Zhang Wuji saw it, he was so shocked that his body shivered. "This ... this is my ..." he said in a shaky voice.

Zhao Min quickly withdrew her hand and put that thing back into her pocket. "It's up to you whether you want to comply with my second request or not," she said, and then turned straight toward the main gate.

Nobody knew what kind of object she showed to Zhang Wuji, which made him looked so frightened and at a loss. Zhou

Zhiruo's eyes were covered by the red veil, so although she heard the exchange between Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min, she was not able to see what it was.

"Miss ... Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji anxiously called, "Please don't go."

"If you want to follow me, you must not bow to the Heaven and the Earth with your new bride too quickly," Zhao Min said, "A real man without a strong determination will suffer a lifelong regret." She was speaking in a loud and clear voice, but her steps were not hindered at all; quickly she had walked pass the main gate.

"Miss Zhao, please wait! We need to discuss it further," Zhang Wuji called out.

Instead of slowing down, she picked up her speed and called back, "All right, as long as you do not get married today," Zhao Min halted her steps, "Then you can come with me."

Zhang Wuji turned his head around and looked at Zhou Zhiruo; his heart full of regret and guilt. He wanted to say something to her, but Zhao Min had already out of his sight. The matter on hand was very urgent, he must take the bull by the horn. Thereupon he gritted his teeth and pursued after Zhao Min.

Zhang Wuji had just reached the main gate when a red shadow flashed by his side; someone had already reached Zhao Min's back. From the inside of the red sleeve came a bare hand, with its five fingers struck down on top of Zhao Min's head. This move was like a rabbit evading the falcon; it was unbelievably fast, and it was more surprising since it came from the bride, Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "This move is so fierce! Where did Zhiruo learn this exquisite stance from?"

He saw Zhou Zhiruo's palm had already covered the top of Zhao Min's head; with her five fingers threatened to crush Zhao Min's brain. Almost without thinking Zhang Wuji flew forward and reached Zhou Zhiruo's main artery. In an abrupt movement, Zhou Zhiruo retracted her arm and 'bang', her elbow struck his chest. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji's body reacted automatically and neutralized this incoming force, but he felt his blood was bubbling up inside his chest, and his feet staggered slightly.

Fan Yao saw the dangerous situation and immediately stepped forward to help; stretching out his palm he pushed toward Zhou Zhiruo's shoulder. Zhou Zhiruo's left hand moved slightly and lightly brushed away. Fan Yao felt his wrist go numb and his push failed. But because of these hindrances, Zhao Min was able to move half a step backward and thus avoid the strike on her head; however, she felt a stabbing pain on her shoulder, as the five fingers of Zhou Zhiruo's right hand penetrated her shoulder near her neck.

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed, and pushed Zhou Zhiruo away.

Although the red veil on her head had not been removed, she could hear the wind to distinguish the movement. She turned her left palm around and hacked down on Zhang Wuji's wrist. Zhang Wuji did not want to fight her, but he saw her attacks to be extremely swift and fierce. Each one of those attacks could take Zhao Min's life. He had no choice but to fend her off.

Zhou Zhiruo's upper body did not move, her stance was steady, but her pair of hands successively launched eight dangerous attacks. Zhang Wuji was forced to use the Qian

Kun Da Nuo Yi just to ward her off.

Eight attacks, eight blocks, all movements happened lightning fast that it was over in just the blink of an eye. Everybody in the main hall held their breaths and stood still with a shock expression on their faces. Zhao Min's shoulder was seriously wounded. She fell down to the floor with blood gushing out from the five holes on her shoulder, and in a short moment dyed her clothes red.

Zhou Zhiruo held her hands and said, "Zhang Wuji, you have been so enchanted by this little witch that you really want to give me up?"

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji pleaded, "Please understand my difficulty. We are engaged. Zhang Wuji will not regret that. I only ask for a few days delay ..."

Zhou Zhiruo said coldly, "Once you leave, don't ever think to come back. I only hope you won't regret your decision."

Zhao Min gritted her teeth and stood up. Without saying anything she walked gingerly outside. Blood was still flowing out from her shoulder, drenching her clothes.

Although the crowd of heroes and warriors had seen almost everything in the Jianghu, they had never seen two women fighting over a husband, blood splashing all over the hall and the bride with red veil on her head injuring her rival with some mysterious martial art. There was not anyone who was not shocked and alarmed; nobody was able to utter anything.

Zhang Wuji stomped his foot and said, "Yifu's kindness to me is as heavy as the mountain. Zhiruo, Zhiruo, please forgive me." Having said that, he ran after Zhao Min. Yin

Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were not clear of what had happened; nobody dared to stop him.

Zhou Zhiruo reached up and tore the red veil from her face away; in a loud voice she said, "Everybody, you are my witnesses today: It was he who abandoned me, and not I who abandoned him. From this day on, Zhou Zhiruo and that surnamed Zhang have no relation whatsoever." Then she lifted up the phoenix crown from her head, grabbed a pearl from it and tossed the phoenix crown to the ground. As she rubbed the pearl in her palms, the pearl turned into powder, which then trickled down to the floor. She said, "If I, Zhou Zhiruo, do not wash away today's disgrace, let me be just like this pearl."

Yin Tianzheng, Song Yuanqiao, Yang Xiao, and the others wanted to console her, telling her to wait for Zhang Wuji to return, and then discuss it further; but they saw Zhou Zhiruo pulled her dress with her bare hands. 'Rip!' the red long embroidered gown was torn into two pieces, and then she tossed it to the ground. She kicked the ground and flew up, making a graceful somersault in the air, and landed on the roof. Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others were taken by surprise; they saw her like a floating red cloud, flying to the east. Her 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was superb, looked like it was not inferior to the Green-winged Bat King Wei Yixiao.

Yang Xiao and the others knew it was useless to pursue her. They were at a loss and stood silently outside for half a day before finally returning to the main hall. In a blink of an eye, Zhao Min's disturbance had made a joyous celebration like a cloud dispersed by the wind. All the Ming Cult people felt a slap on their faces, while the guests who came to congratulate them were also disappointed. Everybody tried to guess what kind of object Zhao Min showed to Zhang

Wuji, which made him forget everything and pursue her. Listening to his words, obviously, this object had a very important relation to Xie Xun; but the truth was, nobody knew anything for sure.

The Emei heroines were talking among themselves in low voices, and then indignantly they took their leave. Yin Tianzheng repeatedly apologized to them, saying that he would make Zhang Wuji come to Emei to seriously apologize and conclude the matrimony, that he sure hoped the good relationship between two families would not be damaged. The Emei heroines declined to make any comment; they dispersed to look for Zhou Zhiruo, while muttering quietly that the man who should be blamed was not worthy to enjoy the good fortune.

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Actually, the object Zhao Min held in her palm and showed to Zhang Wuji was a lock of yellow hair. As soon as he saw it, Zhang Wuji recognized it as Xie Xun's hair. Xie Xun practiced an unusual type of internal energy cultivation, plus, he had a different innate characteristic, so that by the time he was middle-aged, the long hair on his head had turned light yellow, however, the color was not the same as the western region color-eyed people's blonde hair. Zhang Wuji thought that since Xie Xun's hair was cut by Zhao Min, then the person must have fallen into her hands as well. If Zhang Wuji had bowed to the Heaven and the Earth with Zhou Zhiruo, in her anger, Zhao Min might kill Xie Xun. He could not take that risk, but he also could not explain the real reason to Zhou Zhiruo in front of all the heroes and warriors. He knew that practically everybody present at the hall, other than people from the Ming Cult and Wudang Pai, would love to know Xie Xun's whereabouts. Some of them wanted to seek revenge of the killing spree Xie Xun

committed in his former days, but most of them had the real intention of snatching the precious Tulong Saber away.

As Zhang Wuji saw Zhao Min was leaving, he knew he would extremely offend Zhou Zhiruo, yet to him his Yifu's life was more important, therefore, he decided to run after Zhao Min. He saw Zhao Min running as fast as her feet could take her, with blood still dripping from her shoulder to the road along the way. Taking a deep breath, he flew several 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3m] forward to cut her off.

"Miss Zhao," he said, "Please don't compel me to be an unrighteous person that I will be reviled by the heroes and warriors of the world."

Zhao Min's shoulder injury was rather serious. At first, driven by her anger, he made an effort to walk away. But now, listening to Zhang Wuji's words, she said, "You ... you ..." Her anger subsided and she collapsed to the ground. Zhang Wuji stooped down. "Tell me where my Yifu first," he said.

"Take me to rescue him," Zhao Min said, "I will ... I will ... give you directions."

"Is he [Senior] alive?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min had the will, but not the strength. "Your Yifu ... Yifu fell into Cheng Kun's hands," she said.

As he heard the name 'Cheng Kun', Zhang Wuji felt as if blood had been drained from his body; this man was not only an expert in martial art, he was also very crafty and cruel. There was a deep enmity, as deep as the ocean, between Xie Xun and him, so if Xie Xun fell into his hands, he would face an unspeakable danger indeed.

“You can’t do it alone,” Zhao Min said, “Call ... call Yang Xiao and the others to come with you.” As she saying that, she pointed her finger to the west, but suddenly her head limped backward and she passed out.

Zhang Wuji imagined all kind of sufferings his Yifu was subjected to right at this moment; he felt as if his five internal organs were burning. Immediately he embraced Zhao Min, hurriedly ripped her clothes and wrapped the wound. Seeing a Ming Cult disciple by the side of the road, he beckoned him to come, and gave his order, “Quickly report to Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary], tell him to lead everybody to the west at once, tell him that I have an important matter to attend.” The disciple complied and ran to report the order.

Zhang Wuji thought the sooner he leaves the better. Who knows? Perhaps this delay for few minutes would cost him the opportunity to save his Yifu’s life. He carried Zhao Min immediately, and walked quickly toward the city gate, where he ordered the soldier guarding the gate to fetch a steed. Flying up, he mounted the steed and galloped it westward.

After speeding up several ‘li’s, he felt Zhao Min’s body in his bosom gradually turn cold; checking her pulse, he found it to be weak. He was in panic. Stopping down to un-wrap the wound, he saw the five holes were very deep, reaching the shoulder bone, and the skin around the wound had turned blackish purple, an obvious sign of poisoning.

Zhang Wuji was startled, “Zhiruo is Emei disciple,” he mused, “How did she learn this kind of poisonous martial art? Her move was very fierce, even fiercer than Miejue Shitai’s; how is that possible?” He knew that if Zhao Min did not receive help immediately, she would die of poisoning.

But he was wearing the groom clothes, why would he bring any anti-poison drug?

He pondered for a moment then leaped down from the horse. Carrying Zhao Min in his arms, he jumped toward the mountain on his left. He looked around trying to find some herbs to treat poisoning, but after looking for a while he did not find even an ordinary herbal medicine.

With his heart thumping madly, he ran around the hills and the valleys, while muttering a silent prayer. Suddenly his eyes caught some bright color; he saw ahead of him, slightly to the right, there was a bush of about four, five little red flower trees. They were the 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' [little red lotus, seat base of Buddha], which had quite some effect of fighting poison. Although by this time it was the second month of spring, when hundreds of flowers were in full bloom, but to be able to find this red flower right then and there was truly a Heaven's blessing.

In his great delight he carried Zhao Min across two mountain streams toward the bushes. He took some red flowers, chewed them in his mouth, and then he fed half into Zhao Min's mouth, while applied the other half on her shoulder. Everything done, he carried Zhao Min again and continued westward.

Rushing about thirty 'li's, Zhao Min stirred and moaned, and then she awoke, "I ... am I still alive?" she asked in a low voice.

Knowing that the 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' was really effective, Zhang Wuji was very happy. He laughed and replied, "How do you feel?"

"My shoulder itches very much," Zhao Min said, "Ay, Miss

Zhou's hand this time was very fierce."

Zhang Wuji gently put her down, and looked at her shoulder again. He saw the black was not diminishing, but her pulse was not as weak as before. Zhang Wuji thought for a moment. He knew 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' was very slow and was not enough to neutralize the poison. Thereupon he stooped down to put his mouth on her shoulder, and sucked the poisonous blood from her wounds, which he then spat on the ground. The stench attacked his nose and he wanted to vomit.

Zhao Min looked at Zhang Wuji with the corner of her eyes then she reached up and gently stroke his head. "Wuji Gege," she sighed, "Have you figured out what was happening?"

Zhang Wuji had finished sucking the blood and was going to a small creek to rinse his mouth. He walked back and sat by her side. "What is happening?" he asked.

Zhao Min said, "Miss Zhou is a disciple of a famous upright sect. How did she learn this kind of poisonous, heretical martial art?"

"I myself also thought it strange," Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder who taught her that skill?"

Zhao Min laughed sweetly and said, "It must be the little thief from the heretical sect Devil Cult."

Zhang Wuji laughed, "Although the Devil Cult has many devil-heads, nobody knew this kind of martial art. Only Qing Yi Fu Wang's sucking-blood-from-people's-neck skill is similar to Zhang Wuji's sucking-blood-from-people's-shoulder skill." And then he asked, "How did my Yifu fall into

Cheng Kun's hands? Where is he right now?"

"I'll take you there and help you to think of a way to rescue him," Zhao Min said, "As for the exact location, that is Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude. [Zhao Min was playing with words here, Shuo Bude means 'can't say', he was one of the Five Wanderers, and his title was 'Bu Dai Heshang'. I guess for those of you who have not read the missing chapters, you will have to wait patiently to know a little bit more about him.] As soon as I tell you, you will dash ahead and drop me without giving me another thought."

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Surely I am not that heartless and without any sense of righteousness, am I?" he asked.

"For your Yifu's sake, you were willing to abandon your pretty-as-a-flower, precious-as-a-jade new bride; much less me?" Zhao Min said, while slowly leaning her body against his. "Today I disrupted your wedding [orig. dong4 fang2 hua1 zhu2 - lit. cave room flowery (or fancy) candle], are you blaming me?"

Without knowing the reason, right at this moment Zhang Wuji felt happy and content. Other than his concern over Xie Xun's safety, he was even more happy and content than when he was going to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with Zhou Zhiruo. But why he felt like that, he could not explain. However, he could not admit that he was happy because Zhao Min had disrupted his wedding ceremony; therefore, he said, "Of course I blame you. Next time, when you and that elegant hero who will become the 'jun ma ye' [princess' husband] are bowing to the Heaven and the Earth, I will also come and create a great disturbance; I will not let you be the new bride peacefully and easily."

A trace of blush arose on Zhao Min's pale face. "If you come

and disrupt, I am going to kill you,” she said with a laugh.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji heaved a sigh, he was silent and looked low-spirited.

“What is it?” Zhao Min asked.

“I wonder,” said Zhang Wuji, “That Jun Ma Ye must have done many good deeds in his previous life that he deserves such a good fortune.”

Zhao Min said with a smile, “It is not too late for you to do some good deeds right now.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart skipped a beat. “What?” he asked.

Zhao Min blushed, and suddenly went silent. At this point, the two of them felt uncomfortable to continue having an intimate talk, so after they rested for a moment, Zhang Wuji re-applied the medicine and carried her westward.

Zhao Min was carried on his back, her cheek were close to the left side of his face. Zhang Wuji’s nose caught the fragrance of her perfume, his hands were supporting the soft flesh her warm body; he could not help his heart from racing like a wild horse and his mind jumping around like an ape. If only he was not anxious to rescue Yifu, he was seriously contemplating of slowing down his pace to enjoy this once-in-a-life-time opportunity of strolling in the wilderness.

That evening they spent the night on the uncultivated hills at the western suburb of Haozhou. It was only the next day that they found a small town, where they bought two healthy horses. Zhao Min’s poisoned wounds were very difficult to heal that quickly, her body was still too weak to ride the horse alone; she had to lean on Zhang Wuji, riding

one horse together. Riding this way, after five days they arrived within the boundary of Henan.

They were riding along that day, when suddenly they saw the dust was raising ahead of them, as more than a hundred riders gallop their way. They heard the tinkling of iron armors, and saw that it was the Mongolian cavalry. Zhang Wuji held the rein and stopped by the side of the road to make way.

As this Mongolian cavalry group galloped past, dozens of 'zhang's behind them there was another group of riders. This latter group was not arranged in neat formation, some were riding ahead, some were lagging behind, in a very loose array.

Zhang Wuji took a glance and to his surprise saw that the 'shen jian ba xiong' [Eight Divine Archers] were among these riders. "Not good!" he silently groaned, and quickly turned his head away.

These twenty-odd riders saw Zhang Wuji's clothes to be expensive and fancy, with a young woman in his bosom, their faces were turned the other way, actually they did not give these two any thought. The Eight Divine Archers also did not recognize them.

As the riders past, Zhang Wuji was just about to pull the rein to continue forward, when suddenly they heard the sound of hooves beats again. Three riders flew by. The horse in the middle was white, the rider wore an embroidered robe and gold crown. On the either side of him was a chestnut horse. On their saddles Lu Zhangke and He Biweng, the Xuanming Elders, were sitting impressively.

Zhang Wuji was about to turn his head around when Lu

Zhangke saw these two and called out, “Jun Zhu Niang-niang [princess], don’t worry, help is on the way!” While He Biweng made a long whistle.

The Eight Divine Archers and their company heard his whistle and immediately turned around, encircling Zhang Wuji two people in the middle. Zhang Wuji was startled; he looked at Zhao Min in his bosom as if he was saying, “So you are secretly preparing an ambush here to attack me?” But then he noticed her anxious expression and realized he had wrongly accused her, so his heart was relieved.

“Gege [big brother],” he heard Zhao Min say, “I did not expect to see you here. Is Father well?”

It was only after hearing Zhao Min said ‘gege’ two characters did Zhang Wuji pay attention to the young man in embroidered robe; he recognized him as Zhao Min’s brother, Kuku Timur, who adopted a Han name of Wang Baobao. Zhang Wuji had seen him at Dadu twice, but this time his full attention was on Xuanming Elders, so he did not recognize the third person right away.

As Wang Baobao saw his beloved sister again, he was pleasantly surprised; but he did not know Zhang Wuji. Frowning, he said, “Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], you ... you ...”

“Gege,” Zhao Min said, “I fell into the enemy’s evil plot and suffer a heavy poisoned wound. Luckily this Zhang Gongzi [young master] came to help me; otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to see Gege today.”

Lu Zhangke put his mouth next to Wang Baobao’s ear and said in a low voice, “Xiao Wangye [young prince], that man is the Devil Cult’s Cult Leader, Zhang Wuji.”

Wang Baobao had long heard Zhang Wuji's name; he believed Zhao Min was under his control and was forced to say such thing. He waved his right hand, and Xuanming Elders immediately came to within five feet to the left and to the right of Zhang Wuji. Four of the Eight Divine Archers also bent their bows, with the arrows aimed toward Zhang Wuji's back.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Wang Baobao said, "Sire is the leader of a cult, a renowned hero within the Wulin world, yet you are bullying my weak little sister; won't you be a laughingstock of the people? Quickly release her and I'll spare your life today."

"Gege," Zhao Min said, "Why did you say that? Zhang Gongzi definitely showed kindness to me, why did you say he was bullying me?"

Wang Baobao still believed that his sister was under the enemy's power that she did not have any choice but saying like she did. "Zhang Jiaozhu," he said loudly, "Although your martial art skill is strong, a pair of fists cannot match four hands; quickly put my sister down. Today we, both sides, are not going to fight each other. I, Wang Baobao, is true to my words, you don't have to be overly suspicious."

Zhang Wuji thought, "Miss Zhao's poisoned wound is serious; if she is busy running around with me for a thousand 'li's, she won't be easily recovered. Now that we meet her brother, she'd better go with him. The renowned doctors in the prince's palace will certainly do her good." Therefore, he said, "Miss Zhao, your honorable brother wants you to go back, let us part here then. Only, please tell me my Yifu's location, I'll think of some way to rescue him. We will meet again in the future."

While saying that, he could not help but feel heartbroken, knowing full well that they were of different tribes, a Han and a Mongolian, of different status, a royalty and a commoner; the enmity between two sides was very deep. But on the verge of this separation, he had to admit that he felt strong attachment to her. To his surprise, Zhao Min replied, "All along I was intentionally unwilling to tell you Xie Daxia's whereabouts. I only promised to take you there, but I can't tell you the place."

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. "Your heavy injury is not healed yet," he said, "It won't be beneficial for you to make a long and wearisome trip with me. I think you'd better follow your honorable brother to go back home."

Zhao Min's face bore a stubborn expression. "If you cast me away, you won't know Xie Daxia's whereabouts," she resolutely said, "My injury is getting better by the day. The longer we go, the faster I will heal. If I return to the palace, I will die of suffocation."

"Xiao Wangye," Zhang Wuji turned to Wang Baobao, "Please persuade your honorable sister."

Wang Baobao felt strange, he thought for a moment then said with a cold laugh, "Hey hey, your acting is not bad. What kind of trick are you playing? Your palm is on her vital acupoint, of course she will say whatever you want her to say. Such rubbish!"

Zhang Wuji dismounted the horse immediately. Two of the Eight Divine Archers assumed he was going to attack Wang Baobao. 'Swish, swish!' two arrows flew with a strong gust of wind toward him. Zhang Wuji's left hand pulled and pushed, utilizing the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi divine skill, two wolf-tooth

arrows turned around with an even stronger gust of wind. 'Bang, bang!' the arrows struck and broke the bows in their masters' hands. If those two archers did not move fast enough, they would have suffered serious injuries. Even after they struck the bow, the power of these arrows did not diminish; they continued their flight until they hit the ground, with the arrow tails sticking up, the eagle feather vibrated incessantly. Everybody was stunned.

Zhang Wuji stood some distance away from Zhao Min and said, "Miss Zhao, please return home to tend your injury, I will find a way to see you again."

Zhao Min shook her head. "Which palace doctor is better than you are?" she asked, "You are sending me to my death."

Wang Baobao saw that Zhang Wuji had left his sister's side, yet she still insisted on going together with him. He was surprised, but also angry. He said to the Xuanming Elders, "I will have to bother two gentlemen to protect my humble sister. Let us go!"

"Yes!" the Xuanming Elders replied, and went to Zhao Min's horse.

"Mr. Lu and Mr. He," Zhao Min said in loud voice, "I have an important matter I need to take care with Zhang Jiaozhu. Our power is not enough. The two of you better come with me."

The Xuanming Elders cast a glance toward Wang Baobao. Lu Zhangke said, "The Devil Cult's devil head is so crafty, it is inappropriate for Junzhu [princess] to be associated with him too much. We'd better come home with Xiao Wangye to the palace."

Zhao Min knitted her pretty brows, "So the two of you are listening to my brother's order, but not mine anymore?" she asked.

Lu Zhangke smiled and said, "Xiao Wangye has Junzhu's well-being in his mind."

"Humph," Zhao Min snorted. To Wang Baobao she said, "Gege, I have received Father's permission long ago to roam the Jianghu alone, you don't have to worry about me, I can take care of myself. When you see Father, please send my respects to him."

Wang Baobao knew their father had always doted on his beloved daughter, so he did not want to force his will too much; but if he let her go alone with the Devil Cult's Cult Leader, he would never be able to set his own mind at ease. He looked at Zhao Min who was crouching on the saddle, she looked so frail and tender; but as she was lifting the rein to go west, he spread out his arms to block her and said, "Good sister, Father will be here shortly. Why don't you wait for a little while? It won't be too late for you to go after reporting everything to him."

Zhao Min laughed, "As soon as Father comes, I can't leave," she said, "Gege, I don't meddle in your business, I ask you not to meddle in mine."

Again Wang Baobao looked at Zhang Wuji, sizing him up; he noticed that Zhang Wuji's body was like jade, his face handsome. It was obvious from his sister's manner of speaking that she had fallen in love with him. But the Ming Cult revolted against the government and caused lots of problem; thus this man was the enemy of the imperial government. If his sister was bewitched by this devil, the

disaster they were facing was not small. Thereupon he waved his left hand and shouted his order, "Arrest this devil head first!"

Lu Zhangke brandished his deer staff, He Biweng moved his crane pens; together they created one golden ray and two circular black shadows striking toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhao Min knew the Xuanming Elders' power very well. Even if Zhang Wuji were stronger, but with one against two, plus he did not have any weapon in his hand, Zhao Min was afraid he might be injured. "Xuanming Er Lao!" she called out, "If you harm Zhang Jiaozhu, I am going to report it to Father, and he will not spare you."

Wang Baobao was indignant. "Everybody has the right to punish a rebel," he said, "Xuanming Er Lao, kill this little devil head, Fu Wang [Father King] and I will reward you handsomely." And then he added, "Mr. Lu, Xiao Wang [young prince – referring to self] will add four beautiful women for you, I guarantee you will not be disappointed."

These brother and sister were giving them conflicting order; one wanted to kill him, the other said he must not be harmed. The Xuanming Elders were in a difficult position. Finally, Lu Zhangke winked at his martial brother and said in a low voice, "Seize him alive."

Suddenly Zhang Wuji launched the martial art from Sheng Huo Ling; his body slanted slightly, his right arm bent from the elbow, and then turned around from an unthinkable direction and 'Slap!' Lu Zhangke's ear was slapped heavily. "Try to seize me alive!" he shouted.

As he suddenly suffered a great setback, Lu Zhangke was startled and angry at the same time; but he was a top

ranking martial art expert, his mind was clear. He twirled his deer-head staff that even wind and rain would not penetrate it. Zhang Wuji wanted to continue with another sneak attack, but he was unable to do so because of this tight defense.

Zhao Min pulled her reins to make her horse jump forward, but Wang Baobao swept his whip. 'Crack!' it hit Zhao Min's horse right above its left eye. The horse made a long neigh in pain, and its front legs gave up.

Zhao Min was still weak from her injury, she was almost thrown away from her saddle. "Gege," she angrily said, "Must you stop me?"

"Good sister," Wang Baobao said, "Follow me home. Gege will apologize to you later."

"Gege," Zhao Min said, "If you stop me, someone is going to die a terrible death then Zhang Jiaozhu is going to hate me to the bone. It will be hard for your meizi ... your meizi to live."

"What are you talking about?" Wang Baobao said, "The martial art experts in the Ruyang Palace are as numerous as the clouds, they can protect you all around. Let's not talk about this little devil head trying to harm you; he cannot even see you even if he wants to."

Zhao Min sighed. "It's exactly because I am afraid I cannot see him again," she said, "If that happens, I ... I don't want to live anymore."

These two, brother and sister, were very close ever since their childhood; they always told each other everything. Therefore, she did not hesitate to tell him her true feelings

for Zhang Wuji.

Wang Baobao was angry. “Meizi,” he said, “You are confused. You are a Mongolian princess, you are like a tree with golden branch and jade leaves, how can you fall in love with a crude man, a lowly dog? If Father finds out, how can he, Senior, not be angry with you?”

He waved his left hand, and three of his warriors went forward to attack. By this time Zhang Wuji and the Xuanming Elders were competing internal energy. A few ‘zhang’s around them, the strong gust of wind was as sharp as the knife, how could these three warriors launch their attacks?

“Zhang Gongzi,” Zhao Min called out, “If you want to save Yifu, you must save me first.”

Seeing he could not change his sister’s mind, Wang Baobao was very anxious. He reached out and grabbed her. Putting her in front of him on the saddle, his legs squeezed and the horse jumped forward and ran.

Zhao Min’s martial art skill was actually higher than her brother, but her strength was gone because of the heavy injury; all she could do was crying out, “Zhang Gongzi, save me! Zhang Gongzi, save me!”

‘Whoosh! Whoosh!’ Zhang Wuji sent out two palm attacks with all his power, forcing the Xuanming Elders to withdraw three steps backward. Utilizing his ‘qing gong’ [lightness skill], he ran after Wang Baobao’s horse.

The Xuanming Elders and the three warriors were shocked; they also ran after him. Each time these five people were closing in, Zhang Wuji would launch a backward palm strike,

sending out the formidable power of his Jiu Yang Shen Gong [divine energy from Jiu Yang]. Each time his palm struck, the Xuanming Elders were forced to evade, since they did not dare to take his palm head on.

After three times of such strike, Zhang Wuji was able to take the speeding horse over. He leaped up and grabbed the back of Wang Baobao's neck. His grab was coupled with an acupoint sealing technique that Wang Baobao's upper body was immediately paralyzed and his embrace on Zhao Min loosened. Zhang Wuji lifted him up and threw him toward Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke hastily opened up his arms to catch him. Meanwhile, Zhang Wuji had caught Zhao Min, leaped down from the horseback, and dashed toward the hillside on their left. He Biweng and the rest of the warriors ran after them shouting and yelling. But the hill was several hundred 'zhang's tall, climbing it would really test their 'qing gong'. Although the Xuanming Elders possessed strong internal energy, their 'qing gong' was actually not top-ranking. Even four or five warriors were able to run ahead of He Biweng.

Zhang Wuji picked up some rocks and threw them down. Immediately some of the pursuers were hit and fell rolling down the hill. The rest of the pursuers were scared. Although they did not dare to stop because their young prince was watching, their steps were slowing down nonetheless. They saw Zhang Wuji carry Zhao Min higher up the hill and they did not dare to pursue farther.

Wang Baobao opened his mouth to curse, and then he called out, "Release the arrow, release the arrow!" While he also picked up his bow and shoot. 'Swish!' the arrow flew toward Zhang Wuji's back.

His shooting power was actually quite strong, but the distance was simply too far. The tip of the arrow was still a few 'zhang's away from Zhang Wuji's back when finally it fell down to the ground.

Zhao Min was holding tight on Zhang Wuji's neck. Knowing that the pursuers had stopped pursuing, finally she put her heart at rest. She said with a sigh, "Luckily I have known it all along and did not tell you Xie Daxia's whereabouts. Otherwise you, the heartless little devil head, will not be willing to save me with all your might."

Zhang Wuji was running around a depression on the mountain, his steps were not slowing down the least bit. "You tell me," he said, "Won't you be satisfying both sides if you are going home to tend to your injury? Why did you even bother to offend your brother and come with me facing the hardship?"

"I have decided to face hardship with you," Zhao Min said, "As for that brother of mine, I will offend him sooner or later anyway. My only fear is that you won't let me be with you. I don't care much of everything else."

Although Zhang Wuji knew that she loved him, he had always thought that it was a young girl's infatuation, which would pass in a moment. He had never thought that she loved him this much that she would consider riches and honor as dung and dirt, abandon royalty and honor like worn-out shoes. He looked down on her face, and saw the deep emotion on her thin and pale visage; her eyes were looking back at him with a passion similar to the flowing waves. He could not even describe the boundless charm she had on him. Unable to restrain himself, he lowered his head and kissed her slightly trembling cherry lips.

As soon as she was kissed, Zhao Min's face turned completely red. The excitement was too much for her and she unexpectedly passed out.

Zhang Wuji possessed enough medical knowledge to know that she was all right; actually, the appreciation in his heart was growing. But suddenly he remembered, "Even Zhiruo has never treated me this good!"

Zhao Min only lost her conscience for a moment; as she woke up, she saw his pensive look and asked, "What are you thinking? Are you thinking about Miss Zhou?"

Zhang Wuji did not try to lie; he simply nodded. "I am thinking that I have treated her badly," he said.

"Do you regret your decision?" Zhao Min asked.

"When I was about to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with her, I thought about you; and I could not help but feel sad," Zhang Wuji said, "This time I am thinking about her, I actually feel sorry for her."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "That means you love me a lot more, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "Honestly speaking: you, I love and I hate; Zhiruo, I respect and I fear."

"Ha ha!" Zhao Min laughed, "I would rather have you love and fear me, and respect and hate her."

Zhang Wuji smiled. "Well, it's different now. I hate you and I fear you. I hate you because you broke up my happy marriage, and I fear that you won't pay me back for the damage."

“How do I pay to you?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, “I want you to pay it with your own self, so that I can continue the wedding festivities [orig. dong4 fang2 hua1 zhu2 – see similar occurrence above].”

“No! No!” Zhao Min blushed profusely, “You’ll have to speak with my father [orig. die1 die1] first ... and I need to make amends to my Gege. Only then ... only then ...”

“And if your Papa wouldn’t let you?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min sighed. “Then marry the devil follow the devil. I have no choice but follow you, the little devil head, to become the little devil mother.”

With a straight face Zhang Wuji roared, “Audacious witch! You follow Zhang Wuji, the pervert thief who rebels and creates trouble. What punishment do you think you deserve?”

With the same straight face Zhao Min unflinchingly said, “As your punishment, the two of you are to be a happy couple, to live together to old age, and after you die, you are to be banished to the eighteenth level of the underworld, and will not be reincarnated for ten thousand years.”

Speaking to this point, they both broke out in laughter. Suddenly from ahead of them came a loud and clear voice, “Junzhu Niang-niang, Xiao Seng [lit. little/lowly or humble monk – referring to self] have been waiting here for a while.” About twenty something foreign monks appeared from behind the mountain. All of them were wearing red robes.

Zhang Wuji recognized these monks’ clothing and

adornment; that night, on the ground below the Wan An Temple Pagoda, these monks had tried to stop him. Their martial art skill was very strong; luckily Wei Yixiao had set the Ruyang Palace on fire thus forcing them to retreat. Otherwise, it would not be easy for him to rescue the warriors from the Six Major Sects.

One of the foreign monks clasped his palms and bowed, while saying, "Xiao Seng receives the Prince's order to accompany Junzhu return to the Palace."

"What are you doing here?" Zhao Min asked.

"Junzhu is injured," the foreign monk replied, "The Prince is very concerned, he ordered Xiao Seng to take Junzhu home." While speaking, he lifted up a white pigeon in his hand.

Zhao Min understood that her brother had sent a message to their father via a homing pigeon, and so their father must have dispatched these foreign monks to intercept them. "Where is my Father?" she asked.

The foreign monk replied, "The Prince is waiting at the foot of the mountain. He is anxious to see the condition of Junzhu's injury."

Zhang Wuji knew too much talking would not do them any good; he strode forward straight toward them, while shouting loudly, "If you want to live, quickly move aside. Otherwise, don't blame me for being merciless."

Two foreign monks stepped forward side by side, they both stretched out their right palms pushing against Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhang Wuji's left hand made a turn in a pulling and pushing action, he sent the two monks' palms strength back.

The two foreign monks cried out together, “Ami amihong, ami amihong!” It sounded like they were chanting an incantation, or it could be that they were cursing.

Zhao Min was not willing to be overdone; she also shouted, “Ami amihong yourself!”

‘Tap, tap, tap!’ the foreign monks took three steps back. Two other foreign monks behind them stretched out their right palms to stop the first two monks’ backs, and pushed them forward again. These two foreign monks kept using the same stance from the ‘pai shan zhang’ [‘row of mountains’ palm].

Zhang Wuji was not willing to fight them strength with strength and thus waste his energy; so he launched the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert the monks’ force away. To his surprise, as his fingers were barely touching the edge of those two monks’ palms, he felt just like iron pulled by magnet, his fingers stuck firmly onto the monks’ palms.

The two monks cried out again, ““Ami amihong, ami amihong!”

Twice Zhang Wuji tried to shake them off, but both times he failed. He had no choice but strike back with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong through his fingers. Surprisingly, he failed to push the two monks away. And then he saw that behind these two monks, the other twenty two monks arranged themselves in two rows, with each one’s right palm on the back of the monk in front of him. Twenty four foreign monks lined up neatly in two rows.

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, “I have heard Tai Shifu [great master – referring to Zhang Sanfeng] said that in the martial art world of India there is a technique to combine

power. These twenty four foreign monks are combining their strength to fight my palms. Even if my internal strength were stronger, I still cannot defeat the combined power of these twenty four men.”

He was afraid the pursuing soldiers would soon arrive, so letting out a long whistle, he added 30% more power to his palms and then abruptly pushed diagonally down, while he dodged to the left. He knew that these twenty four foreign monks could not possibly combine their strength in one straight line. The six foremost monks had already faltered from the direct impact of the push. Zhang Wuji immediately sent both his palms out, ‘Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap, slap!’ six times, the six foreign monks tumbled down on the ground with blood spurting out from their mouths. But the seventh and the eighth foreign monks continued their attacks forward.

“You want to follow your comrades?” Zhang Wuji thought. His right palm struck out to block these two monks’ palms. Focusing his strength, he was about to push diagonally again when suddenly he heard light footsteps from behind; somebody was sending him a palm attack. He swung his left palm backhandedly to parry this incoming palm attack, but his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi was relying on his Jiu Yang Shen Gong, while right at that moment he was using his entire strength to deal with the combined power of the eighteen foreign monks in front of him; therefore, his strike backward only carried not more than 20% of his normal strength. He felt a blast of cold energy penetrating his palm and went straight into his body. His whole body shivered, he staggered, his body bent down and he fell. It was Lu Zhangke who launched a sneak attack on him with the Xuanming Shen Zhang [black/mysteriously dark divine palm].

“Mr. Lu, stop!” Zhao Min cried out in fear, throwing her own body on top of Zhang Wuji’s. “Who dares to make a move?” she shouted.

Actually, Lu Zhangke wanted to follow up with another palm strike, and thus take the life of the number one formidable enemy he had ever faced in his entire life. But seeing how the princess was protecting him, he had no choice but to hold his hand up and step back. He let out a long and loud whistle to signal his companions that everything went well so that it was safe for them to come over.

“Junzhu Niang-niang,” he said, “The Prince only wishes Junzhu Niang-niang to come home; no more than that. This man is the leader of the rebels; why does Junzhu care about him this much?”

Zhao Min was bitterly angry with him, and was thinking of scolding him badly, but she changed her mind as she did not want to incite his anger that he would harm Zhang Wuji’s life. Therefore, keeping her peace, she sat down, embracing Zhang Wuji in her arms.

A short moment later, they heard jingling bells, as three riders came up the mountain. One of them was He Biweng, the other as Wang Baobao, and the last one was the Ruyang Prince himself. As they came near, they jumped down from their horses. The Ruyang Prince frowned and said, “Minmin, what’s wrong with you? Why didn’t you obey your brother but deliberately create trouble in here instead?”

With tears flooding down her cheeks, Zhao Min cried out, “Father, you sent people to bully your daughter like this.”

The Ruyang Prince took several steps forward, putting out a hand to pull her up. Zhao Min flipped her right hand over, a

white ray flashed as she took a dagger from her bosom and pointed it toward her own abdomen. "Father," she called out, "If you don't let me go, your daughter will die in your presence today."

The Ruyang Prince was frightened that he retreated two steps backward. In a trembling voice he said, "We can talk, don't be like this! You ... what do you want?"

With her left hand Zhao Min pulled the clothes covering her right shoulder. She took off the bandage to reveal five finger holes. The poison had been taken away, but the wounds had not healed yet. Her flesh was vaguely exposed underneath traces of blood, making the wound looked even more ghastly.

Seeing her terrible wounds, Ruyang Prince's heart melted; she was, after all, the beloved daughter he dearly loved. "What happened? How did the wound become this bad?" he repeatedly asked.

Zhao Min pointed toward Lu Zhangke and said, "This man was having an ill intention; he was going to rape your daughter. Of course I resisted him to the death. He ... he ... then grabbed me like this. Please, Father ... Father must help me."

Lu Zhangke was so frightened that he felt as if his soul was fleeing out of his body. "Even to the death Xiao Ren will not dare. How can ... how can there be such thing?"

"Humph!" the Ruyang Prince stared at him angrily. "Such a nerve!" he said, "I was being lenient to you by not investigating the Han Ji affair, now you have the guts to offend my daughter. Seize him!"

By this time, one by one his personal bodyguards and warriors had caught up with them. Even though they knew the severity of Lu Zhangke's martial arts, upon hearing their prince shouting his order to seize the man, four of them stepped in to surround him.

Lu Zhangke was shocked and angered; thinking that the princess was taking advantage of their father-daughter relationship. Just because she was angry he had injured her boyfriend, she had unexpectedly framed him. Like the saying goes, 'blood is thicker than water'. The princess was exceptionally crafty. How could he retaliate to her? In the meantime, he swept away with his palm, forcing the four warriors to retreat. He sighed and said, "Shidi [martial (younger) brother], let's go!"

He Biweng hesitated. Zhao Min called out, "Mr. He, you are a good man, not a lecher like your Shixiong [martial brother]. Quickly arrest your Shixiong, my Father will bestow a high-ranking official position to you, and will reward you handsomely."

The Xuanming Elders' martial art skills might be outstanding, but they were greedy of rank, fame and fortune. Ignoring the dignity of their master, they threw themselves into the Palace for worldly gain. He Biweng knew very well his martial brother's excessive lascivious nature. Listening to what Zhao Min had said, he was 70, 80% convinced. The offer of promotion had made his heart racing. Only, Lu Zhangke and he were not only martial brothers, they were also best friends; how could he make his move against him? So for a moment he was unable to make a decision.

Lu Zhangke's face showed his grief; with a trembling voice he said, "Shidi, if you want promotion, come and arrest me."

He Biweng sighed. "Shige," he said, "Let's go!" Walking side-by-side, Lu Zhangke and He Biweng left.

The Xuanming Elders' prestige had shaken the capital [orig. Jing Shi - modern day Beijing]; the warriors of the Ruyang Palace respected them as immortals. Who would dare to step out and stop them?

The Ruyang Prince shouted his order over and over again, but the warriors only put on an act of shouting and moving around; they just looked on as the Xuanming Elders went down the mountain.

"Minmin," the Ruyang Prince said, "You are injured. Quickly come home with me to recuperate."

Zhao Min pointed toward Zhang Wuji and said, "This Zhang Gongzi saw me being bullied by Lu Zhangke. Seeing the injustice, he went out of his way to save me. But Gege did not know the real story, he accused him of being some leader of the rebels. Father, I have an important business I need to take care with Zhang Gongzi. As soon as we are done, I am going to take him to see you."

From her words, the Ruyang Prince deduced that his daughter wanted to marry this man, but his son had told him that this man was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. Right at that moment, his leaving the capital heading south was to consolidate the troops, to deal with the Ming Cult rebels on the Huai Si and Henan-Hubei region. How could he let his daughter go with this man? He asked, "Your Gege said that this man is the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu. Is that true?"

"Gege loves to joke," Zhao Min said, "Father, take a look at him and tell me how old do you think he is? How can he be

the brain behind the rebellion?”

The Ruyang Prince sized Zhang Wuji up; he saw a young man, not more than 21 or 22 years old, his face pale from the injury, hence it was devoid of the heroic and valiant air he used to have, he looked even less like someone who was in charge of hundreds of thousands strong rebel army. But the Prince also knew that his daughter was very shrewd. In addition, the Ming Cult had caused the nation some major disasters. Perhaps this man was not the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, but he must be one of the important characters within the Ming Cult. Certainly he could not let him go. “Take him inside the city,” he finally decided, “We’ll examine him carefully. If he is not one of the Devil Cult people, I will grant him rewards.” He said that to save his daughter’s face, so that in front of all these people she would not look like a spoiled brat.

Four warriors immediately responded; they walked toward Zhao Min.

“Father,” Zhao Min cried, “Do you really want your daughter to die?” She pressed the dagger in her hand about half an inch [orig. ‘cun’ – thumb, approximately equal to an inch] into her stomach; immediately blood seeped out and dyed her clothes red.

The Ruyang Prince was shocked. “Minmin,” he said, “Please don’t make a scene here.”

Zhao Min cried even louder. “Father, your daughter is unfilial. I have secretly become man and wife with Zhang Gongzi. Please just consider you have never had any daughter. Let your daughter go. Otherwise, I’d rather die in your presence.”

The Ruyang Prince kept pulling his beard with his left hand; cold sweats started to form on his forehead. He had held command over generals and soldiers, he had battled and crushed enemies; he was used to making decisions in split seconds. But today, confronted by his own beloved daughter's embarrassing affair, his hands were bound and he was unable to do anything.

"Meizi," Wang Baobao said, "Both you and Zhang Gongzi are injured. Let us all come home with Father. We will invite renowned doctors to treat you. Afterwards, we will have Father to preside over your wedding. Father will have an ideal son-in-law, and I will have a hero as my brother-in-law. Won't that be good?"

His words were pleasant to be heard, but Zhao Min had been aware early on that he was trying to buy time. If Zhang Wuji fell into their hands, how could he keep his life? He would be executed in less than an hour. Thereupon Zhao Min said, "Father, things have come to this, your daughter marries a chicken, she will follow the chicken; she marries a dog, she will follow the dog. In life or in death, I will follow Zhang Gongzi. Whatever trick you and Gege are playing, you can't hide it from me. I will not fall on it. Right now there are only two choices: if you are willing to spare your daughter's life, let me go. If you want your daughter's death, you won't have to waste any effort."

"Minmin," the Ruyang Prince was angry, "You may want to think it over. Once you follow this rebel thief, you can't be my daughter anymore."

Zhao Min felt as if her intestines were tied in hundreds of knots. She did not want to part with her father and her big brother, remembering that they loved her dearly and had always pampered her. She felt as if her heart was sliced by a

knife; but she knew that if she hesitated even so slightly, Zhang Wuji's life will be gone immediately. Right now, the most important thing was saving her lover's life; she would seek her father and her brother's forgiveness later.

"Father, Gege," she said, "All this is Minmin's fault. You ... please forgive me."

Seeing he would not be able to change her daughter's mind, the Ruyang Prince regretted that he had spoiled her too much. He let her roam the Jianghu unrestrained to such an extent as to cause this kind of trouble. He knew she was strong-willed ever since her childhood, if he forced her, she would certainly commit suicide by stabbing herself. All he could do was heave a long sigh, with tears pouring down from his eyes. "Minmin," his voice was hoarse, "Take a good care of yourself. Father is leaving ... you ... you have to be careful in everything."

Zhao Min only nodded, she did not dare to look at her father anymore. The Ruyang Prince turned around and slowly walked down the mountain. His personal attendant followed him behind, leading his horse, but he seemed oblivious; he did not even remember to mount the horse.

After walking for a dozen of 'zhang's, he suddenly turned his head around and said, "Minmin, is your injury all right? Do you have enough money?"

Swallowing her tears, Zhao Min nodded.

To his personal attendant the Ruyang Prince said, "Give my two horses to Junzhu." The personal attendant warrior complied and led the horses to Zhao Min, and then he followed the Ruyang Prince and walked down the mountain.

The six foreign monks were still lying on the ground; they were incapable of standing up. The rest of the foreign monks, with two monks helping one, carried them follow behind. A short while later everybody had left, leaving only Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min two people.

End of Chapter 34.

Chapter 35 - Casualties of the Lion-slaying Assembly

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The fat Taoist slashed his sword toward Zhang Wuji's throat. His move was very swift and fierce. "Ah!" Zhang Wuji cried out in fear, and jumped out of bed, as if he was delivering his neck toward the blade of the sword.

Lu Zhangke's sneak attack came when Zhang Wuji was resisting the combined power of eighteen foreign monks. The internal energy protecting his body, which formed a barrier on his back, was removed. As a result, the Xuanming cold poison entered his body without resistance and hence his injury was really heavy. He sat cross-legged and circulated the Jiu Yang energy three times around his system. After vomiting two mouthfuls of blood, he felt the constriction in the pit of his stomach loosened somewhat. As he opened his eyes, he saw Zhao Min was looking at him with anxious expression on her face.

"Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji said in tender voice, "You are suffering greatly."

"Are you still calling me 'Miss Zhao' after all this?" Zhao Min asked, "I am no longer a royalty, I am not a 'Junzhu' anymore. You ... are you still regarding me as a little witch in your heart?"

Zhang Wuji slowly stood up. "Let me ask you one question, please answer me truthfully" he said, "Did you or did you not cut the sword wounds on my cousin Yin Li's face?"

"I did not!" Zhao Min answered.

"Then whose malicious hand did it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I cannot tell you," Zhao Min said, "If you can find Xie Daxia, he can tell you all the details."

"My Yifu knows all the details?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Your internal injury has not been healed yet, asking too much question is harmful to your peace of mind," Zhao Min said, "Let me tell you one thing: if after your careful

investigation you can prove that it was I who harmed Miss Yin, you don't need to make any move. I will kill myself in your presence to make amends."

Listening to her speaking with confidence, Zhang Wuji had no choice but to believe her. He was silent for half a day before saying, "Looks like there was a martial art master hiding in the Persian Ming Cult ship. Using some kind of demonic method, he sneaked out in the middle of the night and drugged us all, harmed my cousin, and stole the Yitian Sword and the Tulong Saber. After rescuing Yifu, we need to go to Persia and inquire with Xiao Zhao."

Zhao Min pursed her lips and laughed. "You just want to see Xiao Zhao," she said, "Hence you fabricate some story to give you the reason to do so. Listen to me: don't indulge in fantasy, the sooner your injury is healed, the sooner we can go to the Shaolin Temple to pay them a visit."

"Shaolin Temple?" Zhang Wuji was surprised, "What do we do there?"

"Saving Xie Daxia, of course," Zhao Min replied.

"Is my Yifu in the Shaolin Temple?" Zhang Wuji was even more surprised, "How can he be in Shaolin Temple?"

"It's a complicated story, and I don't claim to know all the details," Zhao Min said, "But I am quite certain Xie Daxia is in the Shaolin Temple. Did I tell you one of my warriors became a monk in the Shaolin Temple? He sacrificed his life to bring me news."

"Why did he sacrifice his life?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min said, "In order to bring me proof, my informant

tried to cut a bunch of Xie Daxia's yellow hair. But the Shaolin Temple guarded Xie Daxia very strictly. After cutting Xie Daxia's hair, my informant went out the temple, but in the end he was spotted and had to receive two palm strikes. He struggled to deliver the hair into my hand, and died not too long afterwards."

"Hey! How fierce!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed. It was not clear however, whether his 'how fierce' exclamation was praising Zhao Min's operation, or was referring to the danger of the situation.

Because his mind was upset, his internal condition was affected that he vomited another mouthful of blood. Zhao Min anxiously said, "If I knew the severity of your injury, I would have not continually vexed you like this. I am not going to talk to you anymore."

Zhang Wuji sat down with his back on a large mountain rock. He tried hard to focus his attention and calm his mind, but there was simply too much in his mind that he was unable to do so. "Shaolin Shen Seng [divine monk] Kong Jian was killed by my Yifu's 'qi shang quan' [seven-injury fist]," he said, "The Shaolin monks and disciples, from top to bottom, have been waiting for more than twenty years to seek vengeance. Furthermore, that Cheng Kun has become a monk in the Shaolin Temple. Since my Yifu has fallen into their hands, how can he keep his life?"

"Don't worry," Zhao Min said, "There is something that will keep Xie Daxia alive."

"What thing?" Zhang Wuji hastily asked.

"The precious Tulong saber," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred, and he understood. The Tulong Saber was known as the 'most revered in the Wulin world'. The Shaolin Pai had been leading the martial art world for the last several hundred years, of course they would want to get their hands on this valuable saber. For the sake of this saber, they would not easily harm Xie Xun's life, but disgrace and humiliation would be difficult to avoid.

Zhao Min continued, "I am thinking that the matter of rescuing Xie Daxia should be handled quietly by just the two of us. The Ming Cult is full of heroes, but if we carried out a large scale attack against Shaolin, the damage to both sides will be heavy. Supposing the Shaolin Pai is not able to defend against the Ming Cult's attack, they might not want to keep Xie Daxia, maybe they would resort to deceit and begin to harm him."

Listening to her thorough consideration, Zhang Wuji was very appreciative. "Min Mei [younger sister], you are right."

It was the first time Zhang Wuji had ever called her 'Min Mei'. Zhao Min felt unspeakable sweetness in her heart; but immediately her parents' kindness and her brother's love came into her mind, which, from this time on, were no longer hers. She could not stop the sweetness turn to bitter.

Zhang Wuji understood her feelings, but he felt inadequate to offer any consolation. He merely mused, "She had entrusted herself fully to me, how can I ever repay her affectionate kindness? Zhiruo is engaged to me, how can I let her down? Ay! Right now, the most important thing is trying to save Yifu; this kind of man-woman love relationship has to be set aside." He exerted his strength to stand up. "Let us go!" he said.

Zhao Min saw that his complexion was ash-grey, she knew

his injury was really not light. Slightly knitting her beautiful brows, she thought aloud, "My Father loves me very much; he won't give us any trouble. I am only afraid Gege will not let us go. As soon as he can have an excuse to leave Father, he would definitely send people to take us back within these next four hours [orig, two 'shichen's - 1 'shichen' is 2 hours]."

Zhang Wuji nodded. He had noticed how firm Wang Baobao handled his affairs; he was truly not an easy person to deal with, he certainly would not give up easily. Presently, both he and Zhao Min were injured; it looked like their journey west to Shaolin would be very slow and full of obstacles. Other than that, they did not have any plan.

"We must leave this dangerous place immediately," Zhao Min said, "We can stop again when we get to the foot of the mountain."

Zhang Wuji nodded and he walked toward the horses with faltering steps. But when he was going to mount the horse, he felt a severe pain in the pit of his stomach, and did not have enough strength to climb up. Zhao Min bit her lips and exerted her strength on her right arm to give him a boost. But as she was doing that, the knife stab wound on her abdomen opened up and quite a lot blood seeped out. She also struggled to climb up the horse and sat behind Zhang Wuji. At first it was Zhang Wuji who supported her, now she had to wrap up her arms around his to support him up. Both of them had to stop for half a day to catch their breaths before they finally let the horse went forward. The other horse followed behind them.

Two people sharing a ride went down the mountain. They traveled along the main road, turning slightly to the east to avoid meeting Wang Baobao. After walking for a while, they

turned toward a small pathway. They were feeling slightly relieved, since they thought that even if Wang Baobao dispatched some people to pursue, they would not easily find this small and remote pathway. They will have more chance of escaping when the sky turned dark and they entered deeper into the mountain.

While riding leisurely, suddenly they heard hoof beats from behind; a pair of riders galloped near. Zhao Min's countenance sank; she tightened her hold on Zhang Wuji's waist while saying, "My Gege comes very quick. It's just our cruel fate, in the end we can't escape from his cruel hands. Wuji Gege, let me go home with him. I am going to ask Father earnestly that we will see each other again later. As eternal and unchanging as the universe, let us not fail each other."

With a bitter smile Zhang Wuji said, "Your honorable brother might not necessarily be willing to let me go."

Just as he was saying that, the riders had come within several dozens 'zhang's behind them. Zhao Min held the rein to let the riders pass. She pulled her dagger out, thinking that if they had a chance, they would escape, but if her brother had made up his mind to kill Zhang Wuji, then the two of them would die together. However, when the two riders came near, they did not even slow down. They were wearing Mongolian soldiers' uniform. They galloped passed them, giving them only a quick glance, and continued forward.

Zhao Min had just mused, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth. Turned out they are only two low-ranking soldiers, not our pursuers." When she saw those two Yuan soldiers held their reins to slow down their horses, talked to each other, and suddenly turned their horses around and returned

toward the two of them.

One of them, a full-bearded Yuan soldier, shouted, "Audacious barbarians! Where did you steal these two good horses from?"

As she heard the tone of his voice, Zhao Min understood that they coveted the pair of steeds given by her father. The horses of the Ruyang Prince were naturally divine steeds, with golden stirrups and silver reins, extraordinarily magnificent and expensive ornaments. The Mongolians loved horses like they loved life itself, so when they saw a pair of excellent horses, how could their hearts be not moved?

Zhao Min thought, "Although these two horses were given by Father, but if these two wicked thieves want to seize them by force, we'd better let them go." She spoke in Mongolian, "Which General's subordinates are you? Why do you dare to be so impolite to me?"

That Mongolian soldier was startled. "Who are you, Miss?" he asked. He saw that these two were wearing expensive looking clothes, the horses they were riding were no small matters either; and now she was speaking fluent Mongolian. He did not dare to be careless.

"I am General Waerl Puche's daughter," Zhao Min said, "This is my brother. We met some robbers along the way and are injured."

The two Mongolian soldiers exchanged a glance, suddenly they laughed loudly. The bearded soldier said in loud voice, "One can't escape, two will not live. We might as well kill these two babies." Unsheathing his saber, he charged forward.

Zhao Min was alarmed. "What are you doing?" she asked, "I'll tell the General and have the two of you pulled by four horses." Execution by pulling by four horses was Mongolian army's capital punishment, in which the lawbreaker's limbs were tied to four horses. As the signal was given, a long whip cracked, the four horses would run to different directions at once, tearing the convict into four parts. It was the cruelest punishment.

The full-bearded Mongolian soldier laughed menacingly. "Waerl Puche was unable to defeat the Ming Cult army," he said, "He randomly executed his subordinates, venting his anger to us, his soldiers. Yesterday the army revolted and chopped your father to be meat sauce. Nothing can be better than to bump into you, two puppies, in here." While saying that, he raised his saber, ready to chop down.

Zhao Min jerked the rein, her horse leaped forward to evade. The soldier pursued to kill. The other Yuan soldier called out, "Don't kill this young girl who is pretty-as-a-flower. We can have fun with her first."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" the bearded soldier replied.

Zhao Mi had an idea so she jumped down the horse and ran to the side. The two Mongolian soldiers immediately dismounted their horses to chase her.

"Aiyo!" Zhao Min screamed, while falling down to the ground. The bearded soldier pounced on her, reaching out to grab her back. Zhao Min's elbow struck backward and hit the vital acupoint on his chest. The bearded soldier grunted and fell on the spot. The other Yuan soldier did not see clearly what had happened to him, he continued his pounce toward her. Zhao Min repeated her trick earlier and struck

his acupoint too.

Normally, she would be able to do these two strikes effortlessly, but this time she had to exert her entire strength that her head was soaked in cold sweat, and she felt as if all her strength was drained out. Propping herself against the ground, she stood up, and then helped Zhang Wuji dismount the horse. With the dagger in her hand she shouted, "Dog thieves! You have defied your superior. Do you want to live or not?"

Because their acupoints were sealed, the two Yuan soldiers felt their upper bodies were numb; they were unable to move their hands. Their lower parts still had feeling, but they were unbearably sore and ache all over. They expected Zhao Min to kill them, so they were surprised when they heard that she seemingly wanted to give them an opportunity to live. "Miss, have mercy!" they hastily said, "Xiao Ren really were not the ones who harmed General Waerl Puche."

"All right," Zhao Min said, "I will spare your lives as long as you do what I say."

The two Yuan soldiers did not care how difficult the matter she was going to tell them to do, they complied immediately, "We'll do it! We'll do it!"

Zhao Min pointed toward her own horses and said, "You two must ride these two horses quickly to the east. Within a day and a night, you must cover 300 'li's; the faster the better. You must not fail."

The two soldiers looked at each other in confusion. They did not expect her instruction to be this trivial. They thought she must mean the opposite of what she was saying.

“Miss,” the bearded soldier said, “Even if Xiao Ren have enormous courage, we will not dare to ride on Miss’ horses ...”

“This is important,” Zhao Min cut him off, “If anybody asks you along the way, you must say that you bought these pair of steeds at the market. You must never mention us two people’s appearances. Do you understand?”

The two Mongolian soldiers were still half believing and half doubting, but Zhao Min repeatedly urged them. They thought that even if she was playing a trick, going away was certainly better than being killed by her dagger. Therefore, step-by-step they slowly walked away from her, and then turned around and jumped onto the saddles.

The Mongolians grew up on horseback. For them, riding a horse was as easy as walking. Although their limbs were still stiff, they were able to drive the horses forward. They were afraid Zhao Min gave them the order out of temporary confusion and would regret her decision, so after a few dozens of ‘zhang’s, they squeezed the horse with their legs and they sped away as fast as they could.

“This is a very good idea,” Zhang Wuji said, “If your Gege’s men see these horses, they must think that we are going east. Where are we going actually?”

“We are going southwest,” Zhao Min replied.

They took the horses the Mongolian soldiers left behind, and leaving the main road, they walked toward the southwest on the wilderness. It was actually a rugged rocky path, full of brambles, which pricked their horses’ legs so that they were dripping with blood. Stumbling and limping, they only

managed to cover twenty some 'li's within two hours of travel.

The sky turned dark. Suddenly they saw a wisp of smoke coming from a chimney of some building in the valley ahead. Zhang Wuji was delighted. "There are houses ahead, we can lodge in someone's home," he said.

When they got near, under the shadow of a big tree they saw the corner of a yellow wall. Turned out it was a temple. Zhao Min helped Zhang Wuji dismount the horse, and then she turned the horses' heads toward the west. Picking up a thorny branch from the ground, she whipped the horses' buttocks several times. The horses let a long neigh, and leaped away to the west.

By what she did, Zhao Min was trying to create yet another diversion to Wang Baobao's pursuing soldiers. By losing their rides, the journey would be more difficult; but she did not give it too much thought. Right now, she was taking their journey one step at a time.

Two people supporting each other walked toward the front of the temple. They saw the tablet by the door had a four-character inscription, 'zhong yue shen miao' [Mount Song (in Henan, one of Five Sacred Mountains) divine temple].

Zhao Min lifted the ring of the gate and knocked three times. She waited for half a day without anybody answering the door, so she knocked three more times. Suddenly from behind the door came a grim voice, "Is it a man or a ghost? Or is it a living corpse?"

The wooden gate opened with a creaking noise. Behind it they saw a shadow. It was dusk, the dark was deepening. That man's back was against the light, so they could not see

his face clearly. But from his bald head and the monk robe he was wearing, he was obviously a Buddhist monk.

Zhang Wuji said, “We [orig. ‘zai4 xia4’ – ‘under’] brother and sister, were robbed and injured during our journey. We hope we can spend the night in your precious monastery, we are asking Da Shi [‘great master’, reverend] to show mercy.”

“Humph,” the man snorted, and then with a cold voice said, “Those who leave home [meaning, becoming Buddhist monks or nuns] do not usually provide convenience to others. You better go.” Immediately he closed the door.

“Helping others is helping self,” Zhao Min hastily said, “By helping us, you might not necessarily be without any benefit.”

“What benefit?” that man asked.

Zhao Min reached up to her ears to take her pair of pearl earrings out, and handed them over to him. The monk saw that each earring had a bead of pearl as big as the tip of his little finger. He sized the two people up, and then said, “All right, helping others is helping self.” He moved aside to let them in.

Holding up Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min led him entered in. The monk took them pass through the main hall and a courtyard, to a room on the eastern side of the temple. “You can sleep here,” he said.

There was neither light nor fire inside the room, it was as dark as a cave. Zhao Min groped around on the bed. There was nothing else on the bed other than a sheet of straw woven mat. They heard a loud and clear voice calling out from outside, “Hao Si Di [fourth younger brother Hao], whom

did you let in?"

"A couple of guests seeking lodging for the night," the monk replied, while stepping out of the room.

"Reverend," Zhao Min called, "Could you please donate two bowl of rice and some plain vegetable dish?"

"Those who left homes receive alms; we do not give to charity," the monk said in haughty tone while striding away.

"This monk is terrible!" Zhao Min bitterly said, "Wuji Gege, you must be very hungry. We must find something to eat tonight."

Suddenly they heard several footsteps coming from the courtyard, as seven, eight men came in. Flame flickered, the door was pushed open and two monks lifted up candlesticks in their hands to illuminate the faces of Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min. In a glimpse Zhang Wuji saw eight monks, short and tall, one had thick eyebrows and huge bulging eyes, the other had face full of wrinkles; none of them had a friendly face.

The old monk with wrinkles said, "Whatever money and jewelry you have, take them all out."

"What for?" Zhao Min asked.

The old monk laughed and said, "Because of fate two benefactors have come over here, just happened to visit this little temple, which is about to carry out a great undertaking: reconstructing the main gate, and repairing the inlay of the golden idol. The benefactors' money and jewelry must be donated. If not, you are offending the Buddha; and then you will be in great trouble."

Zhao Min was indignant. "Isn't that the misdeed of the robbers?" she asked.

"It's sin! It's sin!" the old monk said, "We, eight brothers, used to kill people and burn their houses; we robbed and did all kinds of shady businesses. But recently we laid down our sabers to follow the teachings of Buddha, and so we became casual Buddhist monks. Benefactors have been brought here by karma; the fat sheep has arrived to our door on its own account. Ay, you have made things difficult for us who have left our homes; we are no longer able to keep our purity."

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were very shocked; they did not expect these eight monks were former big bandits. This old monk had been speaking quite bluntly. It sounded like he was going to kill them; he did not even try to keep it a secret, neither did he show any intention to let them go.

Another fierce looking monk said with a laugh, "Miss Benefactor need not be afraid; while we eight monks are robbing and plundering, we lack a mistress to take care of the temple. You have such a beautiful face, truly as if the 'Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa' [Guanyin Bodhisattva, the Goddess of Mercy] descends to the earth. Even if Buddha himself saw you, his heart would have been moved. Wonderful! Wonderful!"

From her pocket Zhao Min pulled out some seven, eight golden ingots and a string of pearls, and placed them all on the table. "All I have is here," she said, "We, brother and sister, are also Wulin people. Gentlemen must respect the Jianghu's 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood]."

The old monk laughed and said, "So you two are Wulin people, nothing can be better than that. I wonder which

school do you belong to?"

"We are Shaolin disciple," Zhao Min said. Shaolin Pai was the number one major sect in the Wulin world. Zhao Min was hoping that these if eight men were not Shaolin disciples, perhaps one of their friends or relatives were somewhat related to Shaolin.

The old monk was startled, his eyes suddenly shone with murderous look. "Shaolin disciples?" he said, "That's truly unfortunate! You two babies should really blame yourself for belonging to the wrong school."

He reached out to pull Zhao Min's wrist. Zhao Min quickly withdrew her hand so the old monk ended up grabbing empty air. Zhang Wuji realized the critical situation they were in. Both Zhao Min and he were heavily injured; it was extremely difficult to fight the enemy. They had battled countless well-known Wulin characters these past several years; would they lose their lives today in the hands of eight nameless lowly robbers? No matter what, he could not let Zhao Min being disgraced without him doing something. Thereupon he said, "Min Mei, hide behind me. I have a way to deal with these eight lowly thieves."

Zhao Min's brain was usually full of bright ideas and clever tricks, but this moment her hands were bound and she was unable to do anything about it. "What kind of people are you?" she asked.

The old monk replied, "We are renegades that the Shaolin Temple chased away. To come across other Sect's Jianghu people, we can still show mercy and not make our moves; but to come across Shaolin disciples, we cannot do anything but kill you. Little Miss, this brother actually wanted you to be the custodian of the temple, but after finding out that you

are a Shaolin disciple, we have no other choice but to kill you first, so that we will not leave any witness behind.”

With a low and deep throaty voice Zhang Wuji said, “Good, huh! You are Yuan Zhen’s disciples, aren’t you?”

“Ah!” the old monk exclaimed in surprise, “That’s strange! How did you know?”

Zhao Min interrupted, “Actually, we are on our way to Shaolin Temple to see Chen Youliang Dage [big brother], to support Yuan Zhen Da Shi [‘great master’ – reverend] to become the Shaolin Temple Fangzhang [abbot].”

“Shan zai! Shan zai! [exclamatory remark used by Buddhist monks, means ‘good, peace’]” the old monk said, “Our Buddha reaching perfection, restoring all living beings.”

“That’s right,” Zhao Min said, “We must join our hearts and minds, accomplishing virtuous acts together.” As she said that, all eight monks broke out in laughter.

Turned out these eight monks belong to the same party as Yuan Zhen and Chen Youliang; they were inducted by Chen Youliang to be Yuan Zhen’s disciples. For the past few years, Yuan Zhen had coveted the Abbot position and thus recruited capable people from everywhere. However, Shaolin Temple monastic discipline was strict, each time they accepted a disciple, the disciple must undergo a rigorous examination by the monastic authorities, a detailed verification of their family background and origins, so that Yuan Zhen found it difficult to do whatever he pleased. Consequently, he cooked up a plan with Chen Youliang, to recruit the warriors of underworld organizations, pirates and bandits, and gathered them outside the Temple as Yuan Zhen’s disciples, yet they were not Shaolin disciples. They

were waiting for an opportunity then together they would take this great undertaking.

Yuan Zhen's martial art skill was very profound and he was able to defeat the Jianghu warriors into submission as soon as he put his hands into it. These Wulin characters had always been admiring Shaolin's fame as the prestigious upright Sect; they had also seen Yuan Zhen's divine martial art skill, therefore, they willingly submit under his tutelage. There were a small number of disciples who were not willing to betray their own original school. Yuan Zhen immediately removed these people. That was the reason they had not been exposed even though they had been engaged in this deceitful scheme for a long time.

When that old monk said 'Our Buddha reaching perfection, restoring all living beings' he actually was saying their secret code. If the other party replied with 'the blooming flower meets Buddha, the heart draws near to Lingshan [a mountain in Guangxi]'; then they would know that they belonged to the same school.

As Zhao Min heard the undertone of the old monk's words, she knew they were Yuan Zhen's disciples, and she deduced that Yuan Zhen had his eyes on the Abbot position; but how would she know they had agreed on some secret code to communicate to each other?

"Fu Dage [big brother Fu]," a short and stout monk said, "This little girl says something about supporting our master to become Shaolin Temple Fangzhang; where did she learn it from? This is a very important matter, we must inquire clearly." Although these eight people had become monks, they still addressed each other as 'Dage', 'Erge' [second brother], and so on; the habit they acquired when they were still involved in the 'lu lin' world. ['lu lin' means 'green

forest', usually refers to the criminal world]

As soon as Zhang Wuji heard these eight men laugh, he knew something had gone wrong. He regretted that his back was seriously injured so he was unable to concentrate his internal energy [see note below]. He had no choice but to painstakingly focus his attention, trying hard to force the 'chi' to break free. He felt the warm energy gathered in a clump in the east, and formed together in a block on the west, but the 'chi' did not want to flow along in the blood vessels.

[orig, 'zhen qi' - true 'chi'. Translator's note: previously, I translated 'qi' as simply 'energy' or internal energy. When reading some martial art related publication, I realized that 'chi' has become an English word. Here are two examples I found:

Ch'i or qi (pronounced "chee" and henceforth spelled "chi") is the Chinese word used to describe "the natural energy of the Universe." (Skeptic Dictionary)

In Chinese culture, Qi (spelled in Mandarin Pinyin romanization), pronounced IPA: [tchi], also ch'i (in Wade-Giles romanization) or ki (in Japanese romanization) is a kind of "life force" or "spiritual energy" that is part of every living thing. It is frequently translated as "energy flow", or literally as "air", "breath", or "gas". (For example, "ti'enqi", literally "sky breath", is the ordinary Chinese word for "weather"). (Wikipedia)

Hereafter, I will leave the word 'qi' as it is, or translate it as 'internal energy'.]

Zhang Wuji saw the old monk's five fingers striking toward Zhao Min like a bird's claw. Zhao Min was powerless to ward it off; she eluded by withdrawing into the bed. Zhang Wuji's mind was very anxious, but he kept sitting cross-legged,

hoping that he could restore 20, 30% of his strength, which would be enough to drive these eight wicked thieves away.

Seeing that Zhang Wuji was still arrogantly sitting in meditation in a time like this, the short and stout monk angrily roared, "This kid is so arrogant; let the old man [referring to self] send him to the western sky first, so that he won't be in the way here!"

When saying that, he raised his right arm while his bones made cracking noise. With a 'whoosh' he sent a fist toward Zhang Wuji's chest. Seeing this desperate situation, Zhao Min's shrill voice cried out in fear; but she saw that as the stout monk's fist landed on its target, his right arm went limp, his eyes rolled until only the whites were visible, and he stood motionless.

The old monk was shocked; he stretched his hand to pull his comrade's hand. The plump monk's hand did not give any resistance, as he had already died. The rest of the monks were startled and angered. They cried out one after another, "This kid uses witchcraft! He is a sorcerer!"

What happened was: when the plump monk used his entire strength to strike Zhang Wuji's chest, he inadvertently hit the 'shan zhong xue' [lit. sheep odor acupoint]. Zhang Wuji's 'Jiu Yang Shen Gong' was not enough to attack the enemy, but it was more than sufficient to protect his own body. Not only did it rebound the fist strength of the enemy's strike, but also because the incoming strike was powerful, it spurred the Jiu Yang 'zhen qi' [real/true/genuine 'chi' - see above] inside his system, increasing the rebound force, adding strength behind the strength, so that the plump monk was killed instantly.

The old monk thought that Zhang Wuji's pocket must be loaded with poison-tipped arrows or some other venomous

stingers, so that the plump monk died of severe poisoning. Stretching out his palm, he struck Zhang Wuji's right arm, which was exposed outside his sleeve, thinking that he had better break Zhang Wuji's arm first before dealing with him further.

As the powerful palm struck Zhang Wuji's arm, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside his body was incited again. The old monk was thrown outside immediately; he flew like an arrow and 'crack!', breaking through the window lattice, he struck the big locust tree in the courtyard, his skull was smashed and his brain burst forth.

The rest of the monks were shouting and screaming. One monk used both of his hands to attack Zhang Wuji's 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint]. Another monk used the 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fought over the pearl], stretching out his fingers to dig into Zhang Wuji's eyeballs. Yet another monk flew up and kicked Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' [pubic area].

Zhang Wuji lowered his head to evade the attack to his eyes, letting the attacker's two fingers to hit his forehead. A series of 'Bang! Bang!', 'Aiyo!', 'Crack! Crack!' was heard; all three monks were shaken to their death one after another. The third monk's flying kick was so powerful that his right leg was broken on the spot. As Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' received the kick, the 'zhen qi' in his body was aroused; unexpectedly the arteries and veins on the right half of his body were open. He mused, "It's a pity this wicked monk died too early. If he had kicked my dan tian several times, he might have helped me restoring my internal energy sooner. Apparently, although my injury is heavy, the recovery is not as difficult as I thought. I think I will need about ten days to half a month of recuperation to recover 100%."

Out of eight monks, five had died miserably. The remaining three wicked monks were frightened out of their wits; they raced against each other to get out of the room, and went straight out of the temple gate. After they were sure that Zhang Wuji did not run after them, they stopped and discussed among themselves. One monk said, "This kid must have used some witchcraft." The other monk said, "I think it was not witchcraft; this kid's internal energy is very strong, he could rebound the strike to injure the enemy." The third monk said, "That's right. In any case we must avenge our brothers' death."

The three of them talked for half a day. One monk suddenly said, "This kid must be suffering a heavy injury. Otherwise, why didn't he run after us?"

"That's right!" the other monk happily said, "Most likely he can't walk. When our five brothers hit him by fist and kick, he fought them by inciting his internal strength. If we use blades to chop him or pierce him, I don't think he has copper muscles or iron bones to resist us."

As the three monks made a decision, one of them got a lance, the other unsheathed his saber, and the third wielded a sword; together they returned to the courtyard. They noticed that the eastern room was extremely quiet, as if it was unoccupied. They peeked over the broken window lattice, and saw that young man was still sitting cross-legged on the bed; his face looked weary, his body was shaky, as if he would fall down any minute. The young girl was wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. The three monks looked at each other; they did not dare to rush in.

One of the monks called out, "Stinky kid, if you have some skills, get out and fight your master for three hundred stances."

Another monk cursed, "What skill does this kid have? All he has is some witchcraft to harm others. That is such a cheap trick, despicable to the lowest end, totally without any sense of shame."

The three monks saw that Zhang Wuji did not reply and he did not get down from the bed either, so they became bolder and bolder, their cursing and swearing were getting dirtier and dirtier. In term of dirty talk, perhaps among the disciples of Buddhism there was nobody who could surpass these three monks.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were not angry at all. They were more afraid of these three monks leave and not return, rather than being annoyed by their coming back to seek revenge. That place was not too far from the Shaolin Temple of the Song Shan [Mount Song in Henan]. If those three monks went to inform Cheng Kun, they would face an even graver problem. It would be almost impossible for Zhang Wuji to treat his injury in less than ten days. Within that period, it would not take as much as Cheng Kun to personally come, one or two martial experts of Chen Youliang's caliber would be difficult for him to resist. Thus, Zhang Wuji was secretly delighted to see these three monks return.

After receiving the five monks' attacks, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside Zhang Wuji's body had been somewhat more controllable, so although he still could not use it to attack the enemy, his heart was not as frightened as it was before.

Suddenly a loud 'Bang!' was heard as a monk kicked the door open and rushed in. A dark green light flashed by, the red tassel trembled, as the lance in his hand came straight toward Zhang Wuji.

“Aiyo!” Zhao Min cried out. Hastily she handed over the dagger in her hand to Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji shook his head without moving his hand. He groaned inwardly, “I don’t have the least bit of strength on my hand; how would I resist the enemy even though I have a weapon? My flesh and blood won’t withstand the enemy’s weapon.” He had not finished musing when the tip of enemy’s lance formed a circle, with its red tassel blooming like a flower, had already reached in front of Zhang Wuji’s chest.

The lance strike was fast, Zhao Min’s mind worked even faster. She reached into Zhang Wuji’s pocket to take a Sheng Huo Ling tablet out, and placed it on Zhang Wuji’s chest to shield it against the spearhead. ‘Bang!’ the tip of the lance struck the Sheng Huo Ling.

Even an extremely sharp weapon like the Yitian Sword was not able to scratch the Sheng Huo Ling, much less an ordinary spearhead. Again, this strike had aroused the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji’s body, which reacted naturally. “Aahhhhh ...” a long and miserable cry was heard as the lance’s pole penetrated the monk’s chest.

This monk had not fallen down when the second monk’s saber was hacking down on the top of Zhang Wuji’s head. Zhao Min was afraid one Sheng Huo Ling would not suffice to block the saber, so grabbing a Sheng Huo Ling in either hand, she swiftly placed them on Zhang Wuji’s head.

Her action was truly effective. With another ‘bang!’ the saber bounced, its back crashed into that wicked monk’s forehead, smashing his skull; but the tip of Zhao Min’s left little finger was also sliced off. In the excitement of the

moment, she did not feel the pain.

The third monk, wielding a sword in his hand, was just about to enter the door; seeing his two companions meet their cruel fate, he screamed in terror and ran out the door.

“We can’t let him escape!” Zhao Min called out, while throwing one Sheng Huo Ling tablet over the window. Her throw was accurate, but she lacked the strength, so it fell down even before touching that monk’s body.

Zhang Wuji wrapped his arms around her and called out, “Throw again!” He concentrated his internal energy in his chest and transmitted it to Zhao Min’s back. Zhao Min threw the Sheng Huo Ling in her left hand. Two more steps, then that monk would have stepped over behind the wall; but the Sheng Huo Ling was so fast that it struck his back. Immediately blood spurted from his mouth and he died on the spot. As soon as the Sheng Huo Ling left their hands, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min fainted and fell on the bed.

At this moment, there were six dead monks in the room, with two more dead monks in the courtyard, so Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had fainted in the pool of blood. The temple was so small and it was located on a remote hill. Under the cold moon and cool breeze, there was not a sound to be heard.

After a long while, Zhao Min gained her consciousness first. Still in daze, she reached out to feel Zhang Wuji’s breathing. She felt that the breathing was weak, but it was long and steady. Propping up herself she arose slowly. Because she was too weak to get him out of bed, she had no alternative but pulling him down, and then rested his head on one of the dead monk bodies. Just this little exertion forced her to sit among the dead bodies, gasping for breath.

After half a day, Zhang Wuji opened his eyes. “Min Mei,” he called out, “You ... where are you?”

Zhao Min gave him one of her captivating smiles. The bright and cold moonlight streamed in from the window. They both saw the other’s face was full of blood, so they’ll know their own faces must be frightening. But after going through a life and death situation together, they felt that the other’s face was very handsome and beautiful. Without realizing it, they both reached out and embraced each other tightly.

In this dramatic battle, Zhang Wuji was able to kill the first seven monks without the least bit of strength on his part; he simply borrowed strength to fight strength, and contrary to his expectation, he did not suffer any harm. However, when throwing the Sheng Huo Ling to kill the eighth wicked monk, both Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had exhausted the remainder of the strength they had after the injury. Right now, the two of them were incapable of moving; all they could do was leaning on dead people’s bodies and quietly wait for their strength to return. Zhao Min wrapped her cut left-hand little finger, and then, still in daze, she went back to sleep.

Around noon the next day, they started to awake. Zhang Wuji sat up and circulated his ‘chi’, trying to harmonize the flow. After meditation for more than an hour, he felt his spirit return. He stood up by pushing himself against the floor, and suddenly heard his tummy was growling. He went to the kitchen by leaning on the wall. He saw a pot of rice, where half of the rice had already turned black, and the other half was also burned that it carried a strong burning smell. He filled a bowl full of burnt rice and returned to their room.

Zhao Min said with a laugh, “You and I are in such a distressed situation today. The Heaven knows, the Earth

knows, you and I know, but nobody else knew about it.”

They both laughed heartily, and then ate the rice with their bare hands. To them, the burnt rice tasted so good that it was better than any exotic delicacies they had ever had.

They had not finished this bowl of rice, when suddenly from the distant came the muffled noise of hooves against mountain rocks. ‘Crash!’ the bowl in their hands crashed down on the tiled floor. Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked at each other. Their hearts were beating rapidly. They heard two horses were coming their way, and stopped in the front of the temple’s main gate. They heard the brass ring on the door was knocked four times, and then someone banged the door. The noise stopped for a moment then the knocker banged four more times.

“What should we do?” Zhang Wuji asked in low voice.

They heard someone outside the door calling out, “Shangguan San’ge [third (older) brother Shangguan], it is me, Qin Laowu [old fifth Qin]!”

“They are going to break in,” Zhao Min said, “Let’s pretend we are dead; we’ll act according to the circumstance.” The two of them lied down among the corpses, with their faces on the floor.

They had just lied down when with a loud crash the door was pushed open. From the noise generated by the broken door, it was obvious that the newcomers had quite a bit of strength. Zhao Min had an idea. “Go lie down near the door,” she said, “Don’t let these people escape.”

Zhang Wuji nodded and crawled toward the entrance. Right at that moment, they heard two people cry out in fear,

followed by 'swish, swish!' as the two people who entered the temple were pulling their weapons out. Obviously they had seen the two corpses in the courtyard.

"Careful!" one of them said in low voice, "Watch for the enemy's ambush."

The other man loudly shouted, "Friends, sneaking and hiding in the dark, what kind of heroes are you? Come out and fight Laozi [the Old Man - referring to self] to the death if you have the nerve." This man's voice was strong and heroic, a sign of his abundant internal energy. He must be the one who pushed the gate open.

He shouted several times, but did not hear the least bit of voice answering his call. "The thieves must have left far away," he said.

The other man said in a hoarse voice, "We must look up everywhere, make sure the enemy is not setting up an ambush."

"Shou Laodi [lit. 'old' (younger brother) Shou]," the one who called himself Qin Lauwu said, "You look to the east and I'll search to the west."

Apparently, the one surnamed Shou was a coward; he said, "I am afraid the enemies are numerous. We'd better go together." Qin Laowu did not say anything.

Suddenly the one surnamed Shou exclaimed in terror while pointing his finger toward the room on the east, "There ... there are more dead people inside!"

The two of them went to the door and saw that in that small room there were about seven, eight corpses lying around on

the floor.

Qin Laowu said, “This temple ... this temple’s eight brethrens have lost their lives at the same time. I wonder whose treacherous hands have done it!”

“Qin Wuge [fifth (older) brother Qin],” the surnamed Shou said, “We must return to the Temple immediately, to report ... report ... report this to Shifu.”

Qin Laowu hesitantly said, “Shifu has urgently ordered us to deliver these invitations promptly, since the guests are expected by the fifth day of the fifth month [orig. ‘duan1 wu3 jie2’ – Dragon Boat (or Duanwu) Festival day] for the Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly [orig, tu2 shi1 ying1 xiong2 hui4]. If we fail, I am afraid we will be punished.”

As he heard the words ‘Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly’, Zhang Wuji was slightly taken aback; and then he was shocked, delighted, ashamed and angry, as a hundred feelings filled up his heart. He mused, “His Shifu issued invitations for some ‘Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly’, his intention must be to gather the heroes and warriors under the Heaven, and then to kill Yifu publicly. From what he said, it seems like before the Duanwu, Yifu’s life will not be harmed. I cannot protect Yifu completely; I let him down by letting him fall into others’ hands that he has to suffer this disgrace. I am unfilial and unworthy; there is nothing worse than this.”

The more he thought, the angrier he got; he wished he had a weapon in his hand and kill these two villains, but he was afraid they might escape while he was powerless to pursue them. Therefore, all he could do was to wait for these two men to enter the room and then cut their way out. Just like before, he hoped the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his body would get

rid of these two traitors. Unexpectedly, because these two saw the room was full of dead bodies, they did not dare to enter, but simply stood and talked in the courtyard

“This is most important,” the one surnamed Shou said, “The sooner we report to Shifu the better.”

“Let’s do this then,” Qin Laowu said, “We take our separate ways; I deliver the invitation, you go back to the Temple to report to Shifu.”

The surnamed Shou was afraid he might run into the enemies on the road; thereupon he did not answer immediately. Qin Laowu was angry, “Take your pick, then. Would you rather deliver the invitations? It is up to you.”

The surnamed Shou contemplated the options in his mind. In the end he decided that returning to their mountain was safer; thereupon he said, “I will follow Qin Wuge’s instruction; let me return to the mountain and give report to Shifu.” Straightaway both of them turned around to leave.

Zhao Min moved slightly and groaned lightly twice. Qin and Shou two people were startled. Turning their heads around they saw Zhao Min were moving. This time they looked carefully and saw that she was a woman.

“Who is this woman?” Qin Laowu was surprised. He walked into the room. Although the one surnamed Shou was a coward, seeing that it was a woman, a seriously wounded woman, he gathered up his courage and followed in.

Qin Laowu reached down to pull Zhao Min’s shoulder. Zhang Wuji coughed and sat up. He took a meditation position with his eyes half open. Qin and Shou two people were extremely shocked to see him suddenly sit up, with his face full of

blood and a terrifying appearance.

“Not good!” the surnamed Shou cried out, “It’s a zombie. This corpse ... this corpse is haunted by a ghost. Qin Wuge must ... must be careful.” He hastily jumped on top of the bed.

“Bad zombie!” Qin Laowu called out, “The one surnamed Qin is not afraid of you.” Lifting up his saber, he ferociously hacked it down on the top of Zhang Wuji’s head.

Zhanh Wuji had been ready with two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands. As soon as the saber hacked down, he raised his tablets and placed them on top of his head. ‘Bang!’ the saber hacked the Sheng Huo Ling and immediately bounced back and smashed Qin Laowu’s brain that he died immediately.

The one surnamed Shou was holding a saber in his hand, but he was trembling all over; how could he dare to slash it on Zhang Wuji’s body? Zhang Wuji was waiting for him to attack, so that his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi might strike him dead. Zhao Min saw that the surnamed Shou was not moving for a long time; she was getting anxious, “This coward is scared out of his wits and does not dare to make his move. If he throws his saber away and run out, how can we stop him?” She saw his teeth were chattering, and then ‘clank!’ his saber fell down from his grip.

“Chop me if you dare,” Zhang Wuji said, “Strike me with your fist.”

“Xiao ... Xiao De [little/lowly one] don’t have any guts,” he replied, “Don’t ... don’t dare to fight Laoye [old master].”

“Kick me, then,” Zhang Wuji said.

The man replied, "Xiao De ... Xiao De do not dare even more."

"You are such a useless man [orig. 'nong2 bao1' - wrapping cloth of boiled wound], you'd better be dead," Zhang Wuji indignantly said, "Quickly chop me once or twice. If I see that your strength is not bad, I might spare your life."

"Yes, yes!" the man scrambled to pick up his saber. He took a glance on the wretched condition of the smashed skull of Qin Laowu, and thought that this zombie's magical power was superior, so it would be better for him to ask for mercy. Hence, he knelt down immediately and knocked his head on the floor, "Laoye have mercy! You have died an unjust death. It has nothing to do ... nothing to do with Xiao Ren [little/lowly man]. Please don't ... don't take revenge on Xiao Ren's life."

Listening to him addressing Zhang Wuji as a dead man, Zhao Min was angry. "Humph," she snorted, "I am surprised in the Wulin world there is this kind of peon with no future."

"Yes, yes!" that man said, "Xiao De has no future, no future. I am only a peon, only a peon."

The more he did not dare to act, the more Zhang Wuji was baffled. Suddenly he had an idea. "Come here!" he barked.

"Yes!" that man hastily replied. He crawled several steps forward, still in kneeling position.

Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms and placed his thumbs on that man's eyeballs. "I'll dig out your eyeballs first!" he roared.

In his great shock, without thinking that man raised his hands to ward off Zhang Wuji's arms with all his strength. Zhang Wuji was expecting this push; borrowing this strength, he slid his arms downward and sealed the 'shen feng' [lit. divine seal ('seal' as in official 'seal' on a letter)] and 'bu lang' [lit. walking/pacing porch] acupoints on his chest.

The man's entire body went numb and he slid down to the floor. "Laoye have mercy! Laoye have mercy!" he loudly cried, "Turns out Laoye is not a zombie. That's very good! Then ... then you have even more reasons to spare my life." By now he was prostrating right in front of Zhang Wuji, after looking clearly that the other party was a living person.

Zhao Min realized that Zhang Wuji sealed the acupoints using a borrowed strength, but the sealing force was really too small. He could only immobilize that man's limbs for a short time; that man's strength was not completely gone. In less than an hour, the sealed acupoints would be opened; and then they would be in trouble. She also knew that there were so many questions she would like to ask him, so obviously they could not kill him yet.

"Your fatal acupoints have been sealed by this Master," she said, "When you take a deep breath, you feel a dull pain deep in the side of your left chest, don't you?"

Following her words, he took a deep breath and did feel pain on the muscle and bones of his left chest. Actually, it was the natural reaction when the flow of 'qi' and the blood was stopped momentarily; but that man did not know, so he wailed and cried for mercy even louder.

"Do you want to save your life?" Zhao Min asked, "I must use a golden needle to unseal the fatal acupoints. But it won't

be easy.”

The man kowtowed and said, “Miss, no matter the difficulty, you must save me. Even if Xiao Ren has to become an ox or a horse, I will still implore you.”

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, “This is the first time I ever see a Jianghu character like you. All right, go find a brick and come back here.”

“Yes, yes!” that man busily said. Stumbling out to the courtyard, he picked a brick and walked back.

“What do you need the brick for?” Zhang Wuji said in a low voice.

Zhao Min smiled mysteriously, “I have an ingenious idea.”

With a brick in his hand, that man respectfully walked in. Zhao Min pulled a golden hairpin from her hair and placed the hairpin on that man’s ‘que pen xue’ [lit. empty basin acupoint] on his shoulder. She said, “I am going to use this golden needle to unseal the blood vessels on the upper part of your body first, so that the deathly ‘qi’ from the fatal acupoint will not flow into your brain. If that happens, you are beyond help. But I don’t know whether this Master is willing to spare your life or not.”

That man looked at Zhang Wuji with a piteous face. Zhang Wuji nodded. That man jubilantly said, “This Daye [grand master] has agreed. Miss, please start immediately.”

“Hmm, are you afraid of pain?” Zhao Min said.

“Xiao Ren only fears death, I don’t fear pain,” the man replied.

“Very well!” Zhao Min said, “Use the brick to tap this golden needle in.”

That man knew that inserting the golden needle into his shoulder would mean his skin and flesh would be injured. But without wrinkling his brows, he lifted up the brick and struck the tail of the hairpin.

As the brick went down, the golden hairpin pierced the ‘que pen xue’. That man did not feel pain at all, on the contrary, he felt comfortable, so his confidence in Zhao Min grew and he did not stop expressing his thanks to her. Zhao Min told him to draw the pin out, and then pierced his ‘hun men’ [soul gate], ‘po hu’ [spirit entrance], ‘tian zhu’ [pillar of the Heaven], ‘ku fang’ [storage room], and other acupoints, seven or eight in total.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “That’s enough! That’s enough!” He stood up, knowing that with these acupoints pierced, if that man wanted to escape, as soon as he exerted his strength to run, these acupoints would flare-up, and he would meet his doom.

“Go fetch two buckets of water,” Zhao Min told him, “We want to wash our faces. And then you can cook some rice. If you want to die, go ahead and put some poison in the food, and then the three of us will become ghosts together.”

“Xiao De does not dare, Xiao De does not dare,” that man said. And thus Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had a servant to attend to their needs.

Zhao Min asked his name. Turned out his surname was Shou [long life], given name Nanshan [southern mountain]; he was known in Jianghu as ‘wan shou wu jiang’ [ten thousand

long life without limit]. Actually, his friends were making fun of him since he had always shrunk from battle, so they said that he would have a long life because he would never be killed in a battle.

Although he belonged to the group of 'lu lin' [lit. green forest, outlaws – see similar occurrence above] warriors who joined Yuan Zhen's school, Yuan Zhen regarded his talent as lacking, his intelligence low, so Yuan Zhen only used him to do the leg work but had never imparted any martial art skill to him.

Even after his acupoints were sealed, Shou Nanshan did not lose his physical strength; he carried out Zhao Min's instructions diligently. He was the one who dragged all nine corpses and buried them in the rear yard, and he also fetched water to clean the temple from all the bloodstains. His martial art skill might be mediocre, but his culinary skill could be considered first class. As Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min enjoyed the meat and vegetable dishes he prepared, they heaped him with praises.

After everything was settled, Zhang and Zhao two people began interrogating him about the 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'. Contrary to their expectation, Shou Nanshan did not even try to conceal anything from them, but too bad his companions did not regard him too highly, so that in many things nobody had ever told him anything. He only knew that the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Reverend Kong Wen, had assigned Yuan Zhen to preside over this assembly. Yuan Zhen, acting on behalf of Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two divine monks, had broadcasted invitations to all heroes and warriors from all schools and sects, clans and societies around the world, to gather at the Shaolin Temple on the Duanwu day, to discuss a very important matter.

Zhang Wuji asked to see the invitation. It was addressed to Fu Chenzi, Gu Songzi, Gui Zangci, and other sword masters of Diancang Pai of Yunnan. The sword masters of Diancang had been famous for quite a while, but they were living way down south in Yunnan, and had never had any contact with the Wulin characters of the Central Plains. This time even Shaolin Pai invited them to come. It was clear that the scale of this assembly was to be magnificent. Shaolin Pai was the Wulin leader. When Kong Wen and Kong Zhi personally issued an invitation, no matter what important matter the addressee was facing, they would lay it aside and come to attend the meeting.

Zhang Wuji noticed that the invitation did not have too many characters on it; it simply said, 'Respectfully inviting (you) on the Duan Yang festival, to get together at Shaolin, to enjoy goblets of wine and be merry with the heroes of the world.' There was no reference on 'lion-slaying' at all.

"Why did that Qin Laowu say this meeting was called 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Shou Nanshan, with a smug look on his face, said, "Zhangye [Master Zhang] did not know it, but my Shifu has captured a very important character who is called Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. For this kind of accomplishment, our Shaolin Pai wants to show our face in front of all the world's heroes. We are going to kill this Jin Mao Shi Wang in public, that is why this meeting is called the 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'."

Suppressing his anger Zhang Wuji asked again, "What kind of character is this Jin Mao Shi Wang? Have you seen him? How did your Shifu capture him? Currently, where is this person being detained at?"

"This fellow Jin Mao Shi Wang," Shou Nanshan said, "Hey,

hey, he is truly magnificent. He is twice as tall as Xiao Ren, his upper arm is thicker than Xiao Ren's thigh. Apart from everything else, whenever he is staring at you with that pair of sparkling bright eyes of his, you would feel that your soul is flying out of your body. Even without fighting, you would kowtow and beg for mercy ..."

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min exchanged a glance, while Shou Nanshan continued, "My Shifu battled him for seven days and seven nights without clear decision of victory and defeat. Later on, my Shifu has gotten angry and launched his earth-shattering 'qin long fu hu gong' [capturing dragon, subduing tiger skill]; finally he was able to defeat him. Right now, this Jin Mao Shi Wang is detained in a large iron cage inside our Temple's Da Xiong Bao Dian [lit. great heroism precious hall]; with seven or eight pure steel chain links bound around his body ..."

The more Zhang Wuji listened, the angrier he got. "I told you to tell me the truth, and not such rubbish!" he roared, "Do you want me to take your life? Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia has lost his vision, how can you say he has a pair of sparkling bright eyes?"

As his lies were exposed on the spot, Shou Nanshan busily said, "Yes! Yes! Xiao Ren must be mistaken."

"Now tell me, have you or have you not seen him [orig. lao3 ren2 jia1 - senior]?" Zhang Wuji asked, "What does Xie Daxia look like? Tell me."

In reality, Shou Nanshan had not seen Xie Xun at all. Knowing that he could no longer lie, he was afraid of his life, so he hastily said, "Xiao Ren does not dare to lie. Actually, I only heard what other brothers have said."

All Zhang Wuji wanted was the exact location of Xie Xun's imprisonment; but after repeated interrogation, Shou Nanshan still was not able to give him any new information. He thought this matter must be of great importance and was held in the strictest confidence, so of course a small peon like Shou Nanshan did not have any access to the information. Therefore, Zhang Wuji had no choice but to let it go. Luckily, the Duanyang festival was still some times away, since it was only the second month, so he still had time to wait until they were fully recovered from their injuries.

The three of them stayed in the Divine Temple of Mount Zhong ['zhong yue shen miao'] for several days. They spent their days in peace and quiet, since Shaolin Temple did not send anybody to establish any contact with the former occupants. Toward the eighth day, Zhao Min's injury had been 70, 80% healed, while Zhang Wuji's internal energy was flowing better progressively. He gradually regained the strength of his four limbs, so now it would not be difficult for them to escape even if the enemies arrived.

Shou Nanshan was waiting on them with all his heart, he did not dare to have the slightest idea of rebelling. Zhao Min said with a laugh, "'Wan Shou Wu Jiang', your mediocre martial art skill is nothing to be talked about, but your talent to be a 'guan jia' [housekeeper/butler] is actually top-notch."

"Well said, Miss," Shou Nanshan answered bitterly.

Everyday Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min enjoyed the delicacies Shou Nanshan meticulously prepared for them, making their stay at the Zhong Yue Shen Miao a comfortable and enjoyable experience.

After about ten more days, the two of them were fully

recovered. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min began to discuss their plan on rescuing Xie Xun.

“Actually, the best way would be to seal Wan Shou Wu Jiang’s fatal acupoints, and then we can send him to Shaolin Temple as our spy,” Zhao Min said, “But this man is so useless [orig. nong2 bao1], that he would most likely give himself away and spoil the important matters. Let’s do this: right now, let us go to the foot of Shaoshi [the western peak of Mount Song, where Shaolin Temple is located]; we will act as the opportunity arises. Only we must change our appearances first.”

“What should we disguise ourselves into?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Shall we shave our heads clean and become a monk and a nun?”

Zhao Min’s face slightly blushed. “Pei!” she spat, “Only you can think of such thing! A young monk hanging around with a young nun all day; what would people think?”

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, “Well then, let’s become husband and wife, a couple of villagers who go to the foot of Shaoshi Peak to open up rice field and gather firewood.”

“Can’t we be brother and sister?” Zhao Min laughed, “If we become husband and wife, I am afraid if Miss Zhou sees it, I would have five more finger holes on my left shoulder.”

Zhang Wuji also laughed, but he felt uncomfortable in continuing their conversation. After asking about the situation and the layout of the Shaolin Temple in details from Shou Nanshan, he said, “The sealed fatal acupoints in your body have been loosened. You can go.”

“However,” Zhao Min added sternly, “For the rest of your life,

you must live in the southern area. As soon as you see snow and ice, you will lose your life. I suggest you move to the south as soon as possible; you must live in a warm climate; the hotter the better. See to it that you do not subject yourself to cold wind; if you ever catch a cold or cough, your life will be in grave danger.”

Shou Nanshan took her advice seriously; he took his leave from the two people, and left the temple heading south that very same day. He spent the rest of his life on the hilly area of the south, being careful not to catch any cold or cough. He died during the years of Yong Le [the third Ming Emperor, 1403 – 1424], of the Ming Dynasty. Although he did not actually live an unlimited life for ten thousands of years [wan shou wu jiang], he did live a long and enjoyable life.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min waited for him to walk far before they carefully cleared up any evidence of their presence from the temple. They went for more than 20 ‘li’s before stopping by at a farmer house to buy two sets of male and female farmer clothes. They changed their clothes in the wilderness, and buried the clothing they were formerly wearing in the ground, before continuing their journey to the foot of Shaoshi Peak in a leisurely pace.

Before they were within seven, eight ‘li’s of the Shaolin Temple, they had already met monks from the Temple three times. “We cannot get any further,” Zhao Min said.

They saw there was a thatched hut by the mountain path, with a patch of vegetable garden in front of it. An old farmer was busy watering the plants.

“Let’s ask for lodging here,” Zhao Min said.

Zhang Wuji went forward, cupped his fists in respect, and

said, "Excuse me, Uncle. We, brother and sister, are traveling. We are tired and wondering if you could give us a bowl of water to quench our thirst."

It was as if the old farmer did not hear him at all, or he ignored him; he kept scooping manure mixed with water with a ladle and splashed it on the root of his vegetables. Zhang Wuji repeated his words, but the old farmer was still ignoring him. Suddenly the wooden door of the hut opened with a creaking noise, a white-haired granny came out. She laughed and said, "My husband is deaf and mute. What do you [orig. ke4 guan1 - honorable guest] need?"

"My sister is too tired to walk," Zhang Wuji said, "May I ask for a bowl of water for her?"

"Please come in," the old granny said.

They followed her in, and saw that the hut was very clean and tidy. The wooden table and stools were spotless. Although her clothes were made of coarse homespun fabric, they were very clean. Zhao Min was very happy; after drinking a bowl of water, she took out an ingot of silver and said with a smile, "Popo [granny], my Gege is taking me to see our maternal grandmother. My legs gave up along the way. I was wondering if we can spend the night here and continue our journey tomorrow early in the morning."

"I don't have any problem with you staying overnight in here, and I don't need your money," the old granny said, "But we only have one bedroom with a single bed in it. Granted that my husband and I can spend the night outside, but you, brother and sister, cannot possibly sleep in one bed, can you? Hey, hey, little Miss, you'd better tell Popo the truth, didn't you run away from home to be with your beloved Gege here?"

As the secret of her heart was revealed, Zhao Min blushed, thinking that this granny had very keen eyesight. She also thought that she did not speak like an old woman of an ordinary peasant family. Thereupon she took a second look at her and noticed that although her back was hunched, her eyes were mysteriously bright; perhaps she was a martial art expert in hiding. Zhao Min also realized that Zhang Wuji did not look like an ordinary farmer either, while her own appearance and mannerisms were certainly not those of farmer women's.

"Popo," she said quietly, "Since you have already guessed correctly, I can't lie to you. This Zeng Gege [big brother Zeng] is my childhood friend. My Father does not like him because his family is poor; he won't let me marry him. My Mama was aware I would rather die than not to be with him, so she told me to go ... to go with him. Mama said that after two, three years, when we ... we get a baby, we may come home. By that time, Father will have no choice but to let us marry each other."

While she was speaking, her face turned deep red, while she often stole a glance toward Zhang Wuji, with eyes full of love. She continued, "My family is quite respectable [orig. you3 mian4 zi5 - have a face] in Dadu. Father is a government official. If we were ever caught, Father would certainly beat Ah Niu Gege to his death. Popo, I have told you everything, you must not tell anybody."

The granny laughed out loud and said, "When I was young, I also belonged to a respectable family. Don't worry, I will let you, two young married, to use our room. This is a remote place, your family certainly won't look for you this far. Even if there is someone who will give you trouble, Popo will not stand on the side doing nothing."

She saw that Zhao Min was tender and beautiful, and she had entrusted her secret with her; so in her heart she regarded Zhao Min favorably. Thereupon she decided to do her best to help this young couple and to see a successful conclusion to their good deed.

Listening to her last words, Zhao Min was convinced that she was a Wulin character. Only this place was so close to the Shaolin Temple, she wondered whether this granny was related to Cheng Kun or not. She decided they must be very careful and must not reveal the least bit of flaw. Thereupon she gracefully knelt down and bowed while saying, "Popo is willing to take care of us, we are very grateful. Ah Niu Gege, come quickly and say thank you to Popo."

Zhang Wuji came following her instruction; he bowed in respect to express his gratitude. The granny smiled and nodded; immediately she let them use her room, while she built another bed in the main room with a plank, padded with some straw, and spread out a woven straw mat on it.

As they entered the room, in a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "The old farmer watering his garden has an even higher martial art skill, did you see that?"

"Ah, I did not see that," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji said, "He was carrying buckets of manure mixture using a shoulder pole, and he walked very slowly, but surprisingly the two buckets were very steady. That is a sign of a very high internal energy skill."

"How is he compared with you?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Let me try it, and we'll see." He lifted her up and carried her on his shoulder just like

someone carries something with a shoulder pole.

“Aiyo!” Zhao Min giggled, “You think I am a bucket of manure mixture?”

From outside the room the granny heard these two people were affectionately laughing and joking; any remnant of suspicions she previously had in her heart immediately vanished.

That evening, the two of them sat for dinner together with the old farmers, husband and wife. To their surprise, they had some chicken and meat dishes. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min deliberately made a show of pinching each other hands under the table, or bumping each other with their elbows, just like a pair of eloping lovers, or like honey mixed with oil, neither one was willing to part with the other even for a moment. At first they were just acting, but later it became quite natural for them to show affection to each other. The granny saw everything, but she simply smiled. It seemed like the old farmer did not see anything; he just looked down and ate his meal quietly.

After dinner, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min went into their room and bolted the door. After teasing each other on the dining table, part pretending and part real, they could not help but feel excited.

Zhao Min whispered, her pretty face blushing, “We are only pretending, we are not doing it for real.”

Zhang Wuji embraced her in his bosom, kissed her mouth and replied in low voice, “If we are only pretending, how can we have a baby in two, three years, and return home so that your Father can see the baby?”

“Pei!” Zhao Min bashfully spat, “Turns out you were eavesdropping on the side and heard everything I said.”

Although Zhang Wuji seemed unrestrained in talking and joking with Zhao Min, in his heart he always remembered that he was engaged to be married to Zhou Zhiruo. Although he hoped that he would live a happy life, he also hoped that after his marriage with Zhou Zhiruo he would be able to sort things out with Zhao Min. At this moment, with a warm and tender body in his embrace, he could not help but feel confused. But finally he restrained himself and only kissed her cherry lips and tender cheeks; and then he carried her to the bed, while he lied down on a wooden bench in front of the bed. He finally fell asleep after circulating his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi for twelve rounds along his entire body.

In the meantime, Zhao Min felt her face flush and her heart beat faster; she tossed and turned on the bed until deep into the night, unable to sleep at all. When she finally drifted off to sleep, suddenly, she heard footsteps from a distance. Someone was coming with great speed and had arrived at the door. She reached out to wake Zhang Wuji up. Coincidentally, Zhang Wuji had also heard the noise and was reaching out to wake her up; so two hands touched and they held each other tight.

They heard a clear and bright voice from the outside, “The virtuous husband and wife of the Du family, we meet again. Old friends come to visit in the night, we hope that we are not being rude”

After half a day, the granny replied from inside the hut, “Is it the ‘Qinghai San Jian’ [Qinghai (or Tsinghai – a province in western China) three swords]? From Chuanxi [western Sichuan] we, husband and wife, have exiled ourselves to this place, out of fear of your Yuzhen Guan [genuine jade Taoist

monastery]. Our dispute was over a small misunderstanding, there is no deep animosity or a major offense between us. Why is it that after so many years Yuzhen Guan has not let it go and force us into hardship? As the saying goes, 'killing the man does not necessarily mean to snatch his land.'"

The man outside laughed and said, "If the two of you are really afraid, kowtow to us three times, then Yuzhen Guan will forget the past and forgive your previous offense."

With a creaking noise the wooden door opened. The granny said, "You are able to pursue to this place, your source of information is quick."

The full moon had just risen, its silver light flooding the earth. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min peeked from a crack on the wooden partition. They saw three Taoist priests wearing yellow crowns stand outside. The one in the middle was short and plump, the tip of his short beard was branched into two points.

"Will the virtuous husband and wife kowtow to apologize, or should we decide life and death with a pair of hooks and a spear?" the short Taoist priest asked.

The granny had not answered him yet when the deaf old man came out in big strides and stood in front of the door. With hands on his waist, he gave the three Taoist priests a cold look. The granny followed him out and stood by her husband's side.

The short-bearded priest said, "Why hasn't the Venerable Du uttered a single word? Do you think it's beneath your dignity to talk to the Qinghai Three Swords?"

"My humble husband is deaf," the granny said, "He could

not hear anything you say.”

“Ah,” the short-bearded priest exclaimed, “Venerable Du’s technique in listening to the wind to distinguish the secret projectile was Wulin’s unique skill; how did he become deaf? Pity, it’s a pity.”

The priest next to him was even fatter than him. ‘Swish’ this priest unsheathed his sword and said, “Du Baidang, Yi Sanniang, are you sure you are not going to use any weapon?”

The granny, Yi Sanniang, replied, “Ma Daozhang [Taoist priest Ma], you are still this impatient? Shao Daozhang, we haven’t seen each other for several years, the hair on your heads have turned gray. Hey, hey, you can’t even let go of a small childish matter, why should we bother talking to you?”

Swiftly she raised both her hands. Bright rays of light flickered from her palms, as each palm held three short blades, less than half a foot each; so she had a total of six blades. The old man Du Baidang followed her lead; his palms also hold six short blades. He swiftly switched the blades in his left hand to his right and the ones in his right hand to his left. It was as if his fingers were crossing each other with matchless dexterity.

The three priests were startled. They had never seen this kind of weapon in the Wulin world. It looked like a flying dagger, but there was no such technique among the flying dagger users. Du Baidang’s pair of hooks had shaken the Western Sichuan, while his wife, Yi Sanniang, was very adept at using a spear. But this time both husband and wife had unexpectedly discarded the weapons they had trained for dozens of years; so these twelve short blades must have extremely fierce and strange stances.

The fat priest raised his sword and he recited with deep veneration in his voice, "Three element-sword formation, heaven, earth and mankind [San Cai Jian Zhen Tian Di Ren]."

The short-bearded priest, Shao He, continued, "Lightning rapidly comes out of Yu Zhen, pursuing the star [dian zhu xing chi chu yu zhen - remember that their monastery was called 'Yuzhen Guan']."

The three priests moved around in a circle, always keeping the Du husband and wife in the center.

Zhang Wuji saw that the priests were moving to the left and all of a sudden to the right and vice versa. It looked like a three-element formation, but not quite a three-element formation. Their three swords were weaved into one bright net, but they did not attack the enemy.

After the three priests had moved for seven, eight steps, Zhang Wuji started to understand the principle behind the formation. He mused, "These three priests are very sly; they said it was a three-element sword formation, but it actually has the five-element principle hidden in it. If the enemy believes it was a three-element formation and fights the heaven, the earth and the mankind, three positions, they would be devoured by the five elements. Then it would be difficult for them to escape, and they would be either killed or injured. They are only three people, but launching a five-element formation; each one has to occupy more than one position and overcome their many variations. Their 'qing gong' and their sword techniques must be extraordinary."

The Du couple stood with their backs against each other. Four hands flickered with silver rays, twelve short blades

were constantly exchanged. Not only they switched the blades from their left to right hands and vice versa, but Du Baidang's blades moved to Yi Sanniang's hand, and Yi Sanniang handed over her blades to Du Baidang's hands. All along not a single blade fell down, the short blades exchanged hands smoothly.

Zhao Min was baffled by their movement. "What kind of magic trick they are playing?" she asked in low voice.

Zhang Wuji knitted his brows without answering. He watched intently for a moment and suddenly said, "Ah, I understand. He is afraid of my Yifu's lion's roar."

"What lion's roar?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji kept nodding his head, and suddenly sneered, "Humph, based on their skill, they want to slaughter a lion and subdue a tiger?"

Zhao Min was more confused than ever, "Are you talking in a riddle?" she asked, "Why are you talking to yourself and leave the listener in bewilderment?"

"These five are my Yifu's enemies," Zhang Wuji said in low voice, "That old man is afraid of Yifu's lion's roar, hence he punctured his own ear to deafness ..."

'Dang, dang, dang, dang, dang ...' Suddenly they heard a series of clanging noises close to each other, just like a string of pearls; the five of them had begun fighting. Three Swords of Qinghai sent out five attacks in succession, all of which were parried by the Du couple. The twelve short blades in their hands went back and forth between the two of them. Under the moonlight the blades looked like three rings around the body, their defense was very tight.

The Qinghai Three Swords tried to penetrate their defense for a long time without any outcome and they immediately changed their tactic into defense. Du Baidang took the opportunity to enter their defense line; his short blade attacked the small and thin Taoist priest, Shao Yan's abdomen.

There was a saying within the martial art practitioners, 'an inch longer, an inch stronger; an inch shorter, an inch more dangerous.' The short blades were less than five inches long, so they were extremely dangerous. 'Swish, swish, swish!' Du Baidang launched three blades which all were meant to kill without any regard for his own safety.

Ma Fatong and Shao Yan immediately launched a double attack, which was fended off by Yi Sanniang's blades. Now they know that the blade technique this couple trained was based on close coordination between the two; one attacks the other defends. The one who attacks focused his/her attention only on the attack. Likewise, the one who defends only care about the defense. Neither one needs to divert his/her attention.

As Shao Yan received three successive attacks, he was forced to block frantically, and retreated several steps back. Du Baidang pounced on his chest, all his blades were aimed to Shao Yan's vital points. Shao Yan's condition was getting more and more critical.

Shao He let out a long whistle, and his sword movements changed. Together with Ma Fatong, the two swords formed a sword net between Du Baidang and Shao Yan, keeping Du Baidang three feet away from them. Now three swords joined together in a very tight defense, so tight that even water would not be able to penetrate.

Zhang Wuji let out another cold laugh and whispered in Zhao Min's ear, "Both of the sword and the blade techniques are meant to battle my Yifu. Look at them, they all concentrate on defense and do not attack too often. More defense less offense; we won't find the outcome of the battle even if they fight for another day and night."

Indeed, after several failed offensive attempts, Du Baidang also changed his tactic into defensive. In low voice Zhao Min said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang's martial art skill is outstanding. These five fellows only concentrate on defense, how can they score a victory?"

They saw the five people exchange blade and swords stances, and successively use seven, eight different moves, but victory or defeat was still difficult to be seen.

"Hold it!" Ma Fatong suddenly shouted, while leaping out of the circle.

Du Baidang also withdrew. His silver beard fluttered, showing off his might and power.

Ma Fatong said, "The blade technique virtuous husband and wife employed, was it trained to slay the lion?"

"Ah!" Yi Sanniang exclaimed, "Your vision is very good."

"Virtuous husband and wife's son was killed by Xie Xun, of course this great enmity must be avenged," Ma Fatong said, "Since you have scouted the enemy's whereabouts at the Shaolin Temple, why didn't you make your move at the earliest convenience?"

Yi Sanniang cast him a sidelong glance. "This is our husband and wife's personal affair," she said, "We don't see any need

to trouble Daozhang [respectable term to address a Taoist priest] over it.”

Ma Fatong replied, “Yuzhen Guan and virtuous husband and wife’s dispute, as Yi Sanniang said, was over a small matter. It certainly does not worth fighting with our lives at stake, does it? How about we turn the enemy into friend by working together to find Xie Xun?”

“What kind of enmity does Yuzhen Guan have against Xie Xun?” Yi Sanniang asked.

“There is no enmity, hey hey,” Ma Fatong said.

Yi Sanniang said, “If you don’t have anything against Xie Xun, why would you painstakingly train this set of sword technique? We both train different techniques to achieve the same goal, which is to fight the Seven-Injury Fist.”

“Yi Sanniang’s vision is also very good!” Ma Fatong said, “In front of a sage we do not tell a lie; Yuzhen Guan only wants to borrow the Tulong Saber.”

Yi Sanniang nodded. She rapidly wrote several characters on Du Baidang’s palm. Du Baidang replied by writing several characters on her palm. Both husband and wife communicated using their fingers instead of their tongues. Using such technique, they were having a discussion for a while.

Yi Sanniang said, “We, husband and wife, only want to seek revenge. For that, we are willing to shed our lives. We have no interest in Tulong Saber whatsoever.”

“That’s great!” Ma Fatong happily said, “The five of us work together to break into Shaolin. Virtuous husband and wife

get your revenge, Yuzhen Guan get the precious saber. By combining our minds and strengths, we can accomplish a great merit. Both sides obtain their desire, friendship will not be harmed.”

Five people struck each other's palms to seal their oath straightaway. Then the Du couple invited the three priests to come into their house to have a detailed discussion on their plan to seek revenge and snatch the Saber away.

As the Three Swords of Qinghai were seated, they saw that the wooden door of the bedroom was closed; unavoidably they eyed it suspiciously. Yi Sanniang said with a laugh, “Don't worry, they are a young couple from Dadu, running away from their homes. The girl is as pretty as jade, the boy is an uncouth fellow; both do not know the least bit of martial art.”

“Sanniang please don't blame us,” Ma Fatong said, “It's not that we don't believe virtuous husband and wife's explanation, it's just that what we are about to accomplish is of the greatest importance, involving the life and death of the word's heroes; if our secret is leaked, I am afraid ...”

Yi Sanniang laughed, “We have fought for half a day, yet this young couple is still sleeping like a dead pig. It's very prudent of Ma Daozhang to be cautious. You'd better see it with your own eyes.”

While saying that, she pushed the door, but the door was bolted from the inside. Zhang Wuji thought that it would be better for him to learn whatever information he could get from these five people before trying to find a way to rescue his Yifu, so he did not want to get rid of these people so soon. He immediately carried Zhao Min and put her on the bed. Quickly he removed his shoes and pulled the blanket

over their bodies.

‘Snap!’ the latch broke by Shao He’s internal energy exertion. With a candlestick in her hand, Yi Sanniang walked in, with the Three Swords of Qinghai followed behind her. Seeing the candlelight, Zhang Wuji turned his eyes toward Yi Sanniang with a blank expression on his face. ‘Swish’ Ma Fatong slashed his sword toward his throat. His action was very swift and fierce.

“Ah!” Zhang Wuji cried out in fear, and jumped out of bed, as if he was delivering his neck toward the blade of the sword. Ma Fatong immediately held his sword, thinking that this man truly did not know any martial art, because no matter how brave, a martial art practitioner would not dare not to evade the sword.

Zhao Min mumbled and turned her body around as if she was still deep in slumber. Under the candlelight, her face looked captivatingly beautiful and tender.

“Yi Sanniang was right,” Shao He said, “Let’s get out of here!” The five of them returned to the living room.

Zhang Wuji jumped down the bed and put on his shoes. He heard Ma Fatong say, “Have virtuous husband and wife confirmed that Xie Xun is really at the Shaolin Temple?”

“We are absolutely certain,” Yi Sanniang replied, “Shaolin Temple has already sent out invitations to invite all heroes for a ‘Lion-slaying Assembly’ on the Duan Yang Festival. If they had not captured Xie Xun, they would certainly lose face in front of the world’s heroes. How could they do that?”

“Hmm,” Ma Fatong was silent for a moment before continuing, “Kong Jian Shen Seng [divine monk] of Shaolin

Pai died under Xie Xun's fist; of course Shaolin monks and disciples would want to avenge him. Actually, all virtuous husband and wife need to do is enter the Temple on the Duan Yang Festival, and open your eyes to see your enemy stretch out his neck to die. Without uttering any word or exerting the least bit of strength, your enmity will be avenged. Why did Mr. Du sacrifice his ears and risk the danger of offending the Shaolin Pai?"

With a cold laugh Yi Sanniang said, "My humble husband destroyed his ears five years ago. Besides, without any reason our only beloved son was murdered by that wicked thief Xie Xun. Our hatred toward him is as deep as the ocean. With this kind of enmity, would we leave the revenge in other people's hands? In order to deal with this wicked thief surnamed Xie, our first step was to pierce his pair of ears deaf. We, husband and wife, will strive to die together with him. Hey, hey, ever since our beloved child was killed by him, we don't have anybody to love in this world anymore. We don't care if we offend Shaolin or Wudang, or die under thousand blades and ten thousand cuts."

In the adjacent room, Zhang Wuji could hear a very deep hatred in her voice; he shivered involuntarily while musing, "Because of his suffering under Cheng Kun's hands, Yifu has vented off his anger to many innocent people in the past. This Du couple does not look like bad people, yet because they are heartbroken over their son's tragic death, they endured pain and suffering just to kill my Yifu. This kind of enmity will not be easily resolved. As soon as I rescue Yifu, I will have to take him far away to avoid further shedding of innocent blood."

By this time, Zhang Wuji did not hear the least bit of noise from the five people on the other side of the door. He took a peak from a crack on the wooden partition and saw the Du

couple and Ma Fatong, three people, were dipping their fingers on the teacups and writing on the table. "These five people are truly cautious," he thought, "Although they are convinced that Zhao Min and I are not Jianghu characters, they are still afraid we might leak their plan. Ay, too many families in Jianghu want to seek revenge on Yifu. There are even more people who covet the Tulong Saber. I am afraid there are countless people who want to get their hands on him even before the Duan Yang Festival. These people not only made extraordinary painstaking effort, they are also martial art experts. Yifu would certainly face a catastrophic suffering if Shaolin Temple is somewhat negligent. Looks like the sooner I can save him the better."

As five people continued their silent, secret discussion, Zhang Wuji lied down on the wooden bench and slept. They woke up at dawn the next day, and saw the Three Swords of Qinghai had already left.

"Popo," Zhang Wuji asked Yi Sanniang, "Why did those three Taoist masters come here last night with shining knives in their hands? At first, I thought they came here to capture us that I was scared out of my wits. Only later I found out that it wasn't the case."

Yi Sanniang was secretly amused to hear him calling the sword a 'knife'; but keeping a straight face she said, "They were astray travelers; they left after drinking a bowl of tea. Zeng Xiaoge [young big brother Zeng], after lunch we are going to take three bunches of firewood for sale in the Shaolin Temple. Would you help us carry a bunch? If the monks in the Temple ask, I will say that you are our son. This might inconvenience you a bit, but I just want to avoid making them suspicious. Your wife who is as-pretty-as-a-flower, must not go out to take a walk on her own."

Although she talked as if she was asking Zhang Wuji's opinion, her tone carried an authority, which did not give Zhang Wuji any chance to say otherwise. As soon as Zhang Wuji heard her, he understood her intention. "She thinks I really am a farmer boy," he thought, "And she wants me to accompany her scouting the Temple. Nothing can be better than that!" Therefore, he immediately agreed.

"Whatever Popo said, Xiaozi [little child - referring to self] will obey," he said, "All I ask is that Popo will give the two of us shelter. We have been running to the east and fleeing to the west with fear and trepidation, without a day of peace."

Right after the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm], Zhang Wuji followed behind the Du couple, each one carried a pile of firewood on their shoulder pole, walking toward the Shaolin Temple. He wore a wide bamboo hat on his head, a short hatchet on his waist, and a pair of straw shoes on his feet. Among the three, he carried the largest bunch of firewood. With a smile on her face, Zhao Min stood by the door, sending him off with her gaze.

The Du couple deliberately walked slow, huffing and puffing along the way, until at last they arrived at a pavilion just outside the Shaolin Temple, where they put down their loads and took a rest. There were two monks chatting idly in the pavilion. They did not think much of seeing these three people.

Yi Sanniang took off her head scarf to wipe her perspiration. She also reached out to wipe the sweats on Zhang Wuji's head while asking, "Child, are you tired?"

At first Zhang Wuji was embarrassed, but then he realized that she said those words with genuine affection; he could not help but look in her eyes. He saw tears were forming on

her eyes, so he knew she must be thinking of the son Xie Xun had killed. He saw she was looking at him with lingering emotion, apparently she was expecting a reply. He was touched, and said, "Ma, I am not tired. You are tired."

When he said, 'Ma,' he was remembering his own mother, hence, his voice was full of emotion too. As Yi Sanniang heard him call her 'Ma,' the dam broke and tears streamed down her cheeks. Instead of wiping the sweat off her head, she used the head scarf to wipe her tears away.

Du Baidang stood up, heaved the firewood and waved his left hand while walking out of the pavilion. Even though he could not hear the two people's conversation, he knew that his wife was overwhelmed with the memory of their perished child. He was afraid she would expose some weakness and the two monks would see through their scheme.

Zhang Wuji went to Yi Sanniang's pile of firewood, took two bunches and added them to his own pile, and said, "Ma, let us go."

Seeing him showing this much consideration, Yi Sanniang thought, "If my child were still alive today, he would be several years older than this young man, and I would have had several grandchildren." For a moment she was only staring blankly and unable to move. Then, seeing Zhang Wuji walking out of the pavilion carrying his load, she stood up to follow. But because she was still excited, she slightly staggered.

Zhang Wuji turned around to help her, thinking, "If my Mama were still in this world, I would hold her like this ..."

One of the monks said, "This young man is actually very filial, which is rare nowadays."

The other monk said, "Popo, are you going to sell this bunch of firewood to the Temple? These past several days Fangzhang [abbot] has issued an order that no outsiders will be allowed to enter the Temple. You'd better come back."

Yi Sanniang was quite disappointed; she thought, "Shaolin Temple has indeed elevated their security, then it won't be easy to go in."

Du Baidang had already proceeded several 'zhang's ahead, but realizing the other two did not follow, he stopped and wait.

The first monk said, "This village family's mother is a loving mother, the son is filial, we must help them. Shidi [younger martial brother], take them through the back door to the kitchen. If anybody asks, just tell them they are the villagers who used to sell firewood. I don't think there will be any problem."

"Yes," the second monk said, "The Supervisor forbid the outsiders to enter the Temple to avoid casual onlookers. These people are honest and upright villagers, why would we hurt their livelihood?" Thereupon he led the Du couple and Zhang Wuji to enter the Temple through the back door. They dropped the firewood in the kitchen and the monk in charge of the kitchen counted some coins to pay them.

Yi Sanniang said, "We have some nice 'da bai cai' [bokchoy, Chinese cabbage], I will send Ah Niu to deliver several catties tomorrow. You don't have to pay, just consider it our gift to all the Shifus to taste something new."

The monk who took her there laughed and said, "Starting tomorrow, you can't come in anymore. If the Supervisor finds out, the blame we have to endure will not end for a lifetime."

The kitchen manager looked at Zhang Wuji, sizing him up, and then suddenly said, "Around the Duan Yang Festival, we are going to have more than a thousand guests in the Temple. We are going to be too busy to fetch water and chop the firewood. This Xiongdi [brother (general term)] looks healthy and strong. How about you come and help us for a couple of months, and I'll give you five silver coins per month for your wages?"

Yi Sanniang was delighted. "That's great," she hastily said, "Ah Niu does not have anything important at home to do. It will be better for him to stay and do errands for all Shifus, while earning one or two coins of silver to help the family out financially."

Zhang Wuji hesitated, he thought, "Many people in the Shaolin Temple know me. Once in a while they are bound to wander into the kitchen then I would be in trouble. If I have to live in the Temple for two months, I must avoid going out to prevent being recognized." Thereupon he said, "Ma, my wife ..."

Yi Sanniang thought it was a heaven-sent opportunity, which could never be expected but could only be accepted. "Your wife is fine at home," she hastily said, "Are you afraid your Mama will mistreat her? You just stay here and listen to the Shifu's words, don't be lazy. After several days, Mama and your wife will come to visit you here. You are a big boy now; can't you get away from Mama for even a day? Do you still want Mama to nurse you and help you urinate?" As she said that, she tussle his hair, with eyes brimming with love.

Actually, the monk in charge of the kitchen had been upset for many days. Around the Duan Yang Great Assembly, heroes from all over the world would gather there; providing

rice and vegetable dishes, and preparing tea were the most difficult parts to be dealt with. Although the Temple Supervisor had allocated more manpower to help in the kitchen, these monks were not in the habit of practicing meditation and Buddhism dharma; they were more interested in training martial arts. Therefore, they were not willing to do menial kitchen works. They went to the kitchen just because the Temple Supervisor told them to; but they carried their haughty attitude in the kitchen, staring a lot at the other kitchen workers, but did not do too much work. By this time, it was still all right, but as soon as they guests arrived, they would be in big trouble. He saw Zhang Wuji was an honest, simple, hardworking villager, so he was determined to retain his service; thereupon he constantly persuaded Zhang Wuji to stay.

Zhang Wuji considered, "I can stay in the kitchen during the day to avoid seeing the Temple masters, while leisurely looking for Yifu's whereabouts in the evening." But he was still pretending to drag his feet, until the monk who took him inside also persuaded him, then he reluctantly complied by saying, "Shifu, I want to get six coins of silver per month from you; five silver coins for my Ma, and one silver coin for my wife to buy some clothes ..."

The monk in charge of the kitchen laughed and said, "It's a deal! Six silver coins a month it is."

After repeatedly exhorting Zhang Wuji to work diligently, Yi Sanniang slowly went down the mountain with Du Baidang. Zhang Wuji ran after them and said, "Ma, please take a good care of my wife."

"I know," Yi Sanniang replied, "Don't you worry."

In the kitchen, Zhang Wuji was extremely busy with

chopping firewood and removing the ashes, lighting fire and fetching water. He deliberately let the ashes smeared onto his face, and let the ashes fell on his hair, so that when he looked at his own reflection in the water jar, he could not recognize his own face. That night he slept with numerous kitchen helpers in a little cabin next to the kitchen. He knew the Shaolin Temple was full of crouching tigers and hidden dragons. Oftentimes there were martial art masters hidden among the kitchen helpers. Thereupon, he was very cautious in all aspects, he did not even dare to speak half a sentence more than necessary.

In this way he passed seven, eight days already, during which time Yi Sanniang took Zhao Min to visit him twice. He worked hard from morning till night, and had never refused any task given to him. The kitchen manager monk was very happy. He also got along well with the other kitchen helpers. He did not dare to ask any question, but he opened his eyes and ears wide, trying to find any clues within the idle talks around him. He expected someone would be sent to deliver food to his Yifu, and then he would follow and try to find where his Yifu was imprisoned. Who would have thought that after waiting patiently for several days, he neither found any clues nor heard any news.

By the evening of the ninth day, he was sleeping on his bed, when suddenly around midnight he heard some faint shouting from about half a 'li' [1 li is approximately 0.5km] away. He arose quietly, and after making sure nobody else was awake, he launched his 'qing gong' towards the direction of the noise.

It seemed like the noise came from the wooded area to the west of the Temple. Leaping up to a big tree, he crouched to look around. After making sure nobody was hiding among the grass around him, he leaped from tree to tree toward the

noise. By this time he started to hear clashing weapons; and then he saw several people who were engaged in a fierce battle.

Hiding behind a tree, he saw flickering light from sabers and swords, as six people, divided into two sides, were fighting each other. The three men wielding swords were none other than the Three Swords of Qinghai, who arranged themselves in the fake 'three-element' formation, which was actually a five-element formation. Their defense was very tight. Their opponents were three monks, each with a saber in his hand, trying hard to penetrate the defense.

After about twenty, thirty stances; 'stab!' one of the Qinghai Three Swords fell by the saber. The fake three-element formation was broken. The other Two Swords of Qinghai were not able to hold much longer. Several stances later, with a miserable 'Ah!' one of them was chopped by the saber. Judging from his voice, it was the short and fat Ma Fatong.

The last man's arm was already injured, but he kept fighting to the death. One of the monks shouted in a low voice, "Hold it!" Three monks with sabers in their hands surrounded him, but did not continue their attacks.

An old-sounding monk said, "Your Yuzhen Guan of Qinghai has never had any enmity or hatred toward our Shaolin Pai; why did you trespass our territory in the middle of the night?"

The last of the Three Swords of Qinghai was Shao He; with grief in his voice he said, "Since the three of us martial brothers have already been defeated, we can only blame our own inadequacy; why do you ask any questions?"

The old-sounding monk said with a cold laugh, "You came for

Xie Xun, and wanted to get the Tulong Saber, didn't you? Hey hey, I have never heard Xie Xun killed anybody from the Yuzhen Guan; so you must be after the Tulong Saber. Based on your child's play skill, do you think you can wander around the Shaolin Temple? The Shaolin Temple has been the leader of the Wulin world for more than a thousand years; it never occurred to me that some people actually look down on us like this."

'Swish!' Shao He took advantage while the monk was talking happily to thrust his sword straight forward. The monk hastily evaded, but he was one step too slow and the sword pierced his left shoulder. The other two monks from either side of him slashed together with their sabers, Shao He's head was immediately separated from his body.

Without saying anything, the three monks picked up the bodies of the Three Swords of Qinghai and walked toward the Temple. Zhang Wuji was just thinking of following them to know the outcome of this affair, when suddenly he heard faint breathing from among the tall grass ahead of him and slightly to the right.

"What a close call!" he silently sighed, "Turns out they set up an ambush here." Immediately he crouched back and remained motionless.

About almost an hour later, he heard from among the grass someone softly clap twice. And then from some distant away someone else also clapped in response. Zhang Wuji saw six monks arose from all around him, each with a weapon in his hand, either a monk's staff, a saber, or a sword. They walked in a fan-shaped formation toward the temple.

Zhang Wuji waited until those six monks were far away before he returned to the cabin. The rest of the kitchen helpers were still sleeping soundly; nobody knew he was

away. He sighed inwardly. "If I did not see it with my own eyes, I would not believe three warriors have just lost their lives in a very short moment." From what he had just experienced, he knew that the Shaolin Temple has set up a thorough security system, far tighter than usual, so he had to be even more careful.

A few more days passed; it was the middle of the fourth month already. The weather gradually turned warm. They were a day closer to the Duanyang Festival with each passing day. Zhang Wuji mused, "If I keep doing this heavy manual labor in the kitchen, in the end it would be difficult for me to find out Yifu's whereabouts. Tonight I must take a risk by going everywhere to investigate."

That night he slept until the third hour [between 3 – 5 am]. He quietly got up and jumped to the roof, crouching behind the stony roof ridge. He had just settled down into position when he saw two shadows from the south, light as a feather, swept passing to the north; their monks' robes floating in the air, the sabers in their hands flicker under the moonlight. They were patrolling monks of the Temple.

After these two monks passed, Zhang Wuji quickly moved several 'zhang's forward. He heard footsteps on the tile floor ahead, as two more monks leaped up. He saw shadows of monks going back and forth everywhere. The security was very tight; he thought that even the security inside the imperial palace was not this strict. Seeing this kind of situation, he knew that if he proceeds, he would be unavoidably detected. Therefore, he decided to return in disappointment.

Toward the third evening, a storm was brewing; thunderclaps boomed and heavy rain poured down from the sky. Zhang Wuji was delighted. "Heaven helps me!" he thought. He saw

the rain was getting heavier, everywhere he looked all he saw was total darkness.

Quick as a lightning, he moved toward the main hall, thinking, “The Luohan Hall, the Damo Hall, the Banruo [lit. great wisdom] Court, the Abbot’s lecture hall, are all Shaolin Temple’s most strategic places. I will explore them all one by one.” However, there were so many buildings and rooms in the Shaolin Temple; in reality, he did not know which way was the Luohan Hall, which way was the Banrou Court.

Trying to hide from the flashes of lightning, he wandered aimlessly until he arrived at a small bamboo grove. He saw ahead of him was a small cottage, and a flicker of light coming through the window. By this time his body was totally soaked; raindrops as big as soybeans hit his hands and face, and bounced back from his skin. Stealthily he crept toward the window, and he heard someone speaking inside; the voice belonged to Reverend Kong Wen, the Abbot of the Shaolin Temple.

Zhang Wuji heard him say, “Because of this Jin Mao Shi Wang, the Shaolin Temple has killed twenty-three people in one month. We are heaping sins on ourselves, contrary to the teaching of Buddha about showing mercy. The Ming Cult’s Guangming Zuo Shi [left emissary of the brightness] Yang Xiao, You Shi [right emissary] Fan Yao, Bai Mei Mo Wang [white-browed devil king] Yin Tianzheng, Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] Wei Yixiao, one after another sent their envoys to the Temple, asking me to release Xie Xun ...”

Hearing this, Zhang Wuji’s heart was reassured, thinking, “Turns out my grandfather [orig. wai4 gong1 – maternal grandfather], Yang Zuoshi, and the others have learned this information and have already sent people to come over here.”

He heard Kong Wen continue, "Of course our Temple refused, but how can the Ming Cult let the matter drop? That Zhang Jiaozhu has reached the pinnacle of the martial art mastery, until now he has not appeared. I am afraid he is operating surreptitiously. Kong Zhi Shidi [younger martial brother] and I owe him for saving our lives. If he personally came and asked for favor, how can we answer him? This is a serious problem. Shidi, Shizhi [martial nephew], do you have any honorable idea?"

An old and deep voice coughed lightly. As Zhang Wuji heard this cough, his heart was shaken, for he recognized this person as Cheng Kun, who changed his name to Yuan Zhen. Zhang Wuji had never spoken with him face to face, but at the Brightness Peak, when Zhang Wuji was inside the cloth-sack, he heard him recounting the past events, and then from behind the rock, he heard him shouting; he was very familiar with Cheng Kun's voice. In a flash, suddenly Xiao Zhao came into his mind. One part of his heart was sweet, the other part was bitter.

He heard Yuan Zhen say, "Xie Xun is being guarded by three Tai Shishu [martial granduncle], so nothing will happen to him. The heroes' assembly this time concerns our Shaolin Pai's thousands of years' prosperity and decline, our glory or disgrace. Some small kindness or resentment from the Ming Cult should not worry Fangzhang Shishu [abbot martial uncle] too much. Besides, the Wan An Temple affair was a collusion between the Ming Cult and the imperial government to make things difficult for the Six Major Sects, doesn't Fangzhang Shishu know it?"

"How can the Ming Cult collude with the imperial government?" Kong Wen was surprised.

Yuan Zhen said, "The Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu was engaged to the Emei Pai Zhangmen [sect leader], Miss Zhou. On their wedding day, the Ruyang Prince's Junzhu Niangniang [princess] suddenly took that fellow surnamed Zhang away. This matter has shaken the Jianghu; Fangzhang Shishu must have heard about it."

"That's right," Kong Wen said, "I heard it was so."

"One of that Junzhu Niangniang's subordinate is a very capable warrior, called Ku Toutuo," Yuan Zhen continued, "Both Shishu must have seen him at the Wan An Temple."

At the Wan An Temple, Kong Zhi was forced by Zhao Min to demonstrate his martial art. Once he was humiliated by Ku Toutuo, because at that time his internal strength was gone, and thus he was not able to resist. He still bore some resentment until this moment. "Humph," he said, "Once this important business is finished, I am going to Dadu to find Ku Toutuo and challenge him."

"Shishu [plural], do you know who this Toutuo really is?" Yuan Zhen asked.

"This Ku Toutuo's knowledge is very vast," Kong Zhi replied, "He seems to know the martial art skill of every school and every sect. In all honesty, I can't pinpoint his school origin."

"Ku Toutuo is actually the Ming Cult's Guangming You Shi Fan Yao," Yuan Zhen said.

"Is that so?" Kong Wen and Kong Zhi exclaimed together. They sounded very surprised.

"How can Yuan Zhen dare to deceive Shishu?" Yuan Zhen said, "If he has the guts to appear on the Duan Yang Festival, once Shishu sees it, you will know."

Kong Wen was deep in thought. "If that's the case, then Zhang Wuji definitely collaborates secretly with that Junzhu. As the Junzhu captured the leaders of the Six Major Sects, Zhang Wuji sold his kindness by rescuing us."

"I am 80, 90% sure that was what really happened," Yuan Zhen said.

"But I still think that Zhang Jiaozhu looks honest, considerate and upright," Kong Wen said, "It's hard to imagine he is that kind of man. We must not wrongly accuse a good person."

Yuan Zhen said, "I am sure Fangzhang Shishu remember the saying, 'knowing a man by his face, not knowing his heart' [zhi1 ren2 zhi1 mian4 bu4 zhi1 xin1]. That Xie Xun is Zhang Wuji's Yifu, he is also one of the four Great Protector Kings [hu jiao fa wang - see my note in Chapter 30] of the Devil Cult. The Devil Cult will disregard everything to save its own people. In the upcoming Lion-slaying Assembly, everything will become apparent."

Thereupon the three of them continued their discussion on how to welcome the guests, and how to stop the enemies who wanted to abduct Xie Xun; they also estimated how many masters from each school and sect would attend the assembly. Yuan Zhen strived to provoke all schools to fight each other. Then, after they had been defeated and suffered some injuries, Shaolin Pai would take advantage by killing the tiger inside the village, subduing all sects, so by right they would obtain the Tulong Saber and kill Xie Xun as a sacrifice for Kong Jian.

Kong Wen strongly emphasized that they should not shed too much blood and offended the Wulin people of the same

principle; also, it seemed like he did not want to insult the Ming Cult.

Kong Zhi, however, wanted to embrace both ideas. He said, "When all is said and done, the most important matter is forcing Xie Xun to reveal the Tulong Saber's whereabouts before the Duan Yang Festival. Otherwise, this 'lion-slaying assembly' will be meaningless and in turn will degrade our Sect's prestige.

"Shidi has stated it well," Kong Wen said, "We must show the Saber without fail at the meeting to set up our prestige. We'll say that this 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wu3 lin2 zhi4 zun1], the precious Tulong Saber has returned under our Sect's control. Then our Sect will rule the world, and nobody would dare to disobey."

"All right," Kong Zhi said, "Let it be so. Yuan Zhen, go and talk with Xie Xun again. Persuade him to hand over the precious Saber and we'll spare his life."

"Yes!" Yuan Zhen replied, "I respectfully follow Shishu's instruction." Footsteps were heard as Yuan Zhen went out the room.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, but he knew that these three Shaolin monks possessed extremely high martial art skill; if he made the slightest noise, he would be immediately detected. If he had to fight the three of them together, he was afraid it would be difficult for him to score a victory. The best he could do would be escape, but then his efforts to save his Yifu would be a thousand times, ten thousand times more difficult. Thereupon he held his breath and stayed perfectly still.

He saw that Yuan Zhen's slim figure was moving to the

north. A loud pitter-patter noise was heard as the heavy rain struck the oilpaper umbrella in his hand. Zhang Wuji waited until he was more than a dozen of 'zhang's away before he lightly slipped out to follow him.

End of Chapter 35.

Chapter 36 - The Three Withered Pine-trees Sprouting Green Leaves

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



As he saw the three black ropes curling toward the upper part of his body, Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and reached to the right. One hand swept, the other tangled as he borrowed these three monks' forces to wind the three black ropes together. Zhang Wuji made several somersaults midair, before his left foot landed on a pine-tree branch, and he steadied his footing.

Under the heavy rain, the patrols on rooftops and everywhere else were considerably slackened off. Zhang Wuji followed close after Yuanzhen by hiding behind the building corners and behind big trees. He saw Yuan Zhen leap over the back wall of the Temple. "Turns out Yifu is imprisoned outside the Temple," he thought, "No wonder I can't find any clues inside the Temple."

He did not dare to jump openly over the wall; creeping along the wall, he climbed up slowly to the top of the wall, and then after the patrolling monks passed by, he jumped down to the ground. In the rain, he saw that the top of Yuan Zhen's umbrella was already more than a hundred 'zhang's to the north of the Temple, and then it turned to the left toward a small hill. Yuan Zhen climbed to the top of the hill with an exceptional speed.

By this time Yuan Zhen was already around seventy years of age, but his agility was still extraordinary; during the ascend to the peak, the umbrella in his hand did not seem to sway at all. His movements were so smooth that it was as if someone was pulling him up with a rope.

Zhang Wuji quickly ran toward the foot of the hill. He was about to climb up when suddenly his eyes caught a glittering light by the mountain path; there was someone with open blade lying in ambush by the roadside, hastily he halted his

step. After waiting for only a short moment, he saw from the cluster of trees four people, three in the front and one in the back, came out and ran toward the peak. From a distant, Zhang Wuji saw there were several pine trees on the peak, but he did not see any buildings. He wondered where Xie Xun could be imprisoned.

After looking around for and not coming across any other people, he followed to the peak. The 'qing gong'skills of the four people ahead of him were excellent. He picked up speed until he was only about twenty 'zhang's behind them. In the darkness he could still see that among the four, one was a woman, the other three were men, all of them wearing regular clothes. He thought, "Most likely these four came to give my Yifu some trouble. I'll let them fight a life and death battle against Yuan Zhen first. There is no hurry for me to interfere."

Arriving at the peak, the four people picked up their speed. Suddenly Zhang Wuji recognized two of them, "Ah, those two are Kunlun Pai's He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, husband and wife."

He heard Yuan Zhen let out a long and fierce cry, turn around abruptly, and dash back down the hill. Immediately Zhang Wuji dove down and hid among the grass by the roadside. He crawled several 'zhang's to the left and heard the ringing noise of clashing weapons, as Yuan Zhen and the newcomers had begun to fight.

From the sound of the clashing weapons, it sounded like only two people were fighting Yuan Zhen. "The other two are not fighting," he mused, "Obviously, they proceed to the peak to find Yifu." Right away he crept faster among the thick patch of grass to the peak of the hill.

As he arrived at the peak, he only saw a bare stretch of flat land; there was no building, only three tall pine trees arranged in triangle, their branches looked like soaring dragon, reaching up to the sky. He felt strange, "Could it be that Yifu is not being held here?" he thought.

He heard some rustling noise coming from the underbrush on his right, as someone was creeping along; followed by Ban Shuxian's voice, "Move quickly, our two Shidi's may not necessarily able to hold that Shaolin monk."

"That's right," He Taichong replied. Two people rose up and charged toward the three pine trees.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Xie Xun was really around here, so he did not dare to act rashly; he crawled forward among the thick grass. Suddenly he heard He Taichong exclaim, 'Hey!', as if he was hurt. Raising his head, he saw that He Taichong was standing among the pine trees, brandishing his sword fiercely like he was fighting with somebody, but actually no one else was visible. He only heard occasional 'bang, bang, bang', as if He Taichong's sword was colliding with some strange weapon. Zhang Wuji was even more perplexed. He crawled several steps forward and focused his eyes to have a closer look; he could not help but gasp in shock.

It turned out that the trunks of the two pine trees diametrically opposite to him were hollow. The cavities' size was just enough to accommodate one person. In each cavity sat an old monk, each monk held a black long rope in his hand, with which they were attacking He Taichong, husband and wife. The third tree was right in front of Zhang Wuji. A black long rope also came out from this tree, so he knew that this tree also had an old monk inside its trunk.

In the dark night, the three black ropes did not reflect any

light, hence, they were almost invisible in their movements. He Taichong, husband and wife, anxiously brandished their swords in tight defense. But because they could not see the direction of the enemies' weapons, they did not have the leeway to launch any counterattack. These three long ropes appeared to move slowly, but in reality they were very fast, yet they did not create any wind at all. Under the heavy rain, in the middle of the night, on a lone hill peak, the three ropes moved like ghosts or as if by magic; it was unspeakably weird.

Mr. and Mrs. He repeatedly shouted their frustrations. They tried to get away from the encirclement of these trees, but each time they charged outward, the ropes would always push them back in. Zhang Wuji was secretly amazed; these ropes moved noiselessly, the people who drove them must have had profound internal energy, clear, pure and without any ruggedness in its utilization, might not be inferior to his own. He was astonished. "Yuan Zhen said that Yifu is being guarded by his three Tai Shishu [grand martial uncles]; obviously, they are these three old monks. Their power is extremely profound!"

"Ah!" suddenly he heard a miserable cry, as He Taichong's back was hit by the rope and was thrown out from the encirclement; his life was gone right away.

Ban Shuxian was shocked and saddened. While she is losing her concentration ever so slightly, the three ropes struck together to burst her skull and break her four limbs, making her lose her human form. One of the black ropes shook and threw Ban Shuxian's corpse out from the encirclement.

Yuan Zhen was fighting and stepping backwards, luring his opponents toward the peak. "Come!" he called out, "You dare to come here, receive your death."

Although his two opponents were Kunlun Pai's masters, with his level of martial art skill, Yuan Zhen would not necessarily lose, but it would be difficult to kill both of them at once. At best he would be able to injure only one of them, and then the other one would unavoidably escape. Therefore, he led them toward the pine trees.

The two of them were still several 'zhang's away from the trees, when suddenly they saw He Taichong's body. They both halted their steps, and in that split second, two long ropes came noiselessly from behind their heads and wound around their waists. The ropes jerked, and two people were thrown down from the peak, which was more than a hundred 'zhang's tall. Needless to say, they died as soon as their bodies struck the foot of the hill, but they cried out wretchedly when they were still midair, and the echo of their cry was still heard even after they were dead.

In a short moment the three old monks had killed four masters of Kunlun Pai. They were able to lift heavy objects as if they were very light, and accomplished the task with ease; the level of their martial art skill was rarely seen. Zhang Wuji believed they were superior to Lu Zhangke and He Biweng, although not as good as Tai Shifu [grand master] Zhang Sanfeng, whose skill was immeasurably deep; but they had definitely reached the boundary of divinity. Shaolin Pai unexpectedly still had this kind of old expert, perhaps even Tai Shifu and Yang Xiao were not aware of it. His heart was beating fast; he crouched down in the thick grass and did not dare to make the slightest movement.

He saw Yuan Zhen kick twice in succession, sending the bodies of He Taichong and Ban Shuxian into the deep valley below. As the corpses fell, it was a moment later that they heard two dull thuds as the bodies crashed into the bottom of

the valley. Zhang Wuji mused, "He Taichong repaid my kindness with evil. Today he came here to harm my Yifu and steal the precious saber away; his conduct was despicable. But he was a martial art master, truly an expert in the martial art study, and a leader of his school. I did not expect for him to end his life this way."

He heard Yuan Zhen respectfully say, "Three Tai Shishu's divine skill is truly matchless; just by raising your hands, you have killed four masters of the Kunlun Pai. Yuan Zhen's respect is endless. Words truly cannot express it."

"Humph," one of the old monks snorted, but did not say anything.

Yuan Zhen continued, "Yuan Zhen received Fangzhang Shishu's [abbot martial uncle] order to come and wish three Tai Shishu well, and also to talk with the prisoner."

One raspy voice said, "Kong Jian Shizhi [martial nephew] was very virtuous and highly skilled. The three of us are very fond of him. We were hoping he would develop Shaolin's martial art study. It was unfortunate that his life was lost in this villain's hands. The three of us have lived in seclusion for decades and for a long time did not encumber ourselves with the mundane affairs of this world; yet because of Kong Jian Shizhi we came to this hill peak. This criminal is worthy of death for his many sins. One chop of the blade will take his life away. Why should you waste your breath and disturb our peaceful meditation?"

Yuan Zhen bowed respectfully and said, "Tai Shishu's instruction is right. However, Fangzhang Shishu also said, my En Shi [benevolent master] was harmed by this villain, but what kind of martial art my En Shi possessed? How could this villain, alone, have the power to injure him? For that reason,

we imprison him here and trouble three Tai Shishu to guard him. First, to lure his comrades to come and save him; we hope to destroy the enemies who help him harm my En Shi one by one. Second, we want him to hand over the precious Tulong Saber, so it won't fall into other sect's hands, and thus usurp our position as the most revered in the Wulin world, which we have held for thousands of years."

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji could not help but gnash his teeth in anger. He mused, "This evil thief Yuan Zhen truly deserves to be cut in pieces for all his crimes. His words are sweet but poisonous. He persuaded these three monks, who have lived in seclusion for decades, to come out, and borrow their hands to slaughter the martial art masters of the Wulin world."

"Hmm," he heard one of the old monk said, "You can speak with him."

By this time, the heavy rain had not stopped, thunders were still rumbling incessantly. Yuan Zhen walked toward the center of the triangle and kneeled on the ground. "Xie Xun," he said toward the ground, "Have you thought about it? You only need to say where you keep the Tulong Saber, I will let you go."

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "Why did he speak to the ground?" he thought, "Could it be there is some kind of dungeon down there, and my Yifu is held captive in it?"

Suddenly, with a loud and clear voice one of the old monks said angrily, "Yuan Zhen, Buddhist monks [orig. chu1 jia1 ren2 - people who leave their homes] do not tell lies. Why do you deceive him? If he did tell you the place where he hid the Saber, would you really let him go?"

“Tai Shishu, please understand,” Yuan Zhen replied, “Disciple thinks that my En Shi’s enmity is deep, yet if we consider it carefully, our Sect’s prestige is more important. If he would tell us the precious Saber’s whereabouts for our Sect to obtain it, then we would let him go. After three years, disciple will find him to avenge my En Shi.”

“So be it,” the old monk said, “In the Wulin world, good faith is of priority. Our words are like arrows. Even toward big criminals or the most evil people, Shaolin disciples should not break our promise.”

“Respectfully received Tai Shishu’s instruction,” Yuan Zhen said.

Zhang Wuji thought, “These three Shaolin monks not only possess outstanding martial art skill, they are also virtuous eminent monks; too bad they unconsciously fell into Yuan Zhen’s sinister plot.”

He heard Yuan Zhen shout to the ground again, “Xie Xun, did you hear my Tai Shishu? Three Seniors have agreed to let you go.”

Suddenly from underground came the reply, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

As Zhang Wuji heard this heroic, but bleak voice, which he recognized as his Yifu’s voice, his heart was shaken. He fought the strong urge to dash forward, kill Cheng Kun and rescue Xie Xun, knowing that as soon as his presence was detected, three Shaolin eminent monks’ black ropes would immediately strike him. Even without Cheng Kun joining the fight, he knew he could not match the collaboration of these three monks. He thought, “I will wait for that evil monk Yuan Zhen to go, then I will step forward to pay my respect to the

three monks. Then I will explain the entire complicated story. They are enlightened Buddhists, they must know how to tell right from wrong.”

“Xie Xun,” he heard Yuan Zhen say with a sigh, “You and I are old, why do you still painfully hang on to those past events? At most in twenty more years, you and I both will return to the yellow earth. I know I have wronged you, but I have also done you some good. Let the matter of the past go.”

As he was rambling on, Xie Xun did not pay him any attention. He simply waited until he was done speaking, then he said, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

Yuan Zhen talked repeatedly for half a day, but the answer was always, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

Yuan Zhen coldly laughed and said, “I give you three days to think it over. After three days, if you still do not want to tell the Tulong Saber’s whereabouts, you know with what method I will deal with you.” As he said that, he stood up, paid his respect to the three monks, and walked down the hill.

Zhang Wuji waited until he walked far. He was about to arise to greet the three monks when suddenly he felt something different on the air around him. This sneak attack did not have the least bit of forewarning. He was shocked and immediately rolled away, while feeling two long objects from above of his face coming horizontally across, perhaps no more than half a foot in front of his face. It was a swift and marvelous attack, but did not carry the least bit of wind. These objects were precisely the long black ropes.

As he rolled a little more than a ‘zhang’ away, another black rope was pointing toward his chest. This black rope was as

straight as a lance or a staff, coming fast to pierce his body. At the same time, the other two ropes wound around from behind him.

Only a moment ago he had seen four masters of Kunlun Pai, in short succession, lost their lives under these three black ropes. So he knew that these strange weapons were very fierce. Feeling the danger he was facing at this precise moment, he was even more shocked.

Flipping his left hand, he caught the black rope piercing his chest, thinking he would fling it to the side. But suddenly the rope shook and a whiff of mountain-moving, ocean-stirring internal energy attacked the pit of his stomach. If this attack hit its target, all his ribs would be broken and his five internal organs would be crushed.

In the time of split seconds, Zhang Wuji moved his right hand to the back, warding off the two black ropes threatening his back, while his left hand launched the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, backed by Jiu Yang Shen Gong. One hand pulled the other pushed and he let his body follow the force. With a 'whiz!' he flew up to the sky.

Right that moment, three, four flashes of lightning lit up the sky. Two of the eminent monks grunted, as if they were amazed at his martial art skill. These lightning illuminated Zhang Wuji. Three eminent monks lifted up their heads, only to see that the martial art master whose skill had reached the pinnacle of perfection was actually a peasant young man with a filthy face. They were even more surprised.

Three black ropes flew up menacingly like three black dragons, aiming Zhang Wuji from three different directions. Taking advantage of the lightning, Zhang Wuji looked down to see clearly the three monks' appearances. The one sitting

on the northeast corner had a black face, as black as the bottom of a wok. The one on the northeast corner had a sickly yellowish face, the same color of a dry wood. The monk sitting on the south had a deathly pale, paper-white face. All three monks had deep cheeks. They were so thin that it looked as if they did not have any flesh on their bodies. The yellow-faced monk only had one eye. The five eyes of the three old monks sparkled under the lightning so that they looked even more mysterious.

As he saw the three black ropes curling toward the upper part of his body, Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and reached to the right. One hand swept, the other tangled as he borrowed these three monks' forces to wind the three black ropes together. This move was based on Wudang Pai's Taiji technique, which he learned from Zhang Sanfeng. The force was like a vortex, the three black ropes were wound into one.

The lightning flashed, the thunder rumbled continuously; the Heaven was showing off its soul-shaking power. Zhang Wuji made several somersaults midair, before his left foot landed on a pine-tree branch. As he steadied his footing, in between the crashing thunder he said in a clear voice, "Junior [orig. *hou4 xue2 wan3 bei4* – younger generation who studied later] Ming Jiao Jiao Zhu [the Ming Cult's Cult Leader] Zhang Wuji, pays his respect to three eminent monks."

His left foot was treading on the tree branch, his right foot high up in the sky, while he bowed in respect. As he bowed down, the pine-tree branch followed his movement, bobbing up and down slightly like a wave. Zhang Wuji stood steadily, his body appeared graceful. Although he was bowing down, he was up on the tree looking down, so he did not degrade his position.

As the three monks felt their ropes were wound up by Zhang

Wuji's internal energy, they shook their hands and the ropes separated. In this short exchange, the three monks had used the three different stances of nine different styles [san1 zhao1 jiu4 shi4]; each style concealed dozens of variations, dozens of killer moves. Who would have thought that each one of these three stances of nine styles was warded off by the opponent? Each style was extremely dangerous. If the opponent missed even a fraction of a hair width, his flesh would be crushed and his bones broken, he would die a violent death. However, Zhang Wuji appeared to stay composed, as if he was crossing a ravine like flat ground. The three eminent monks had never faced this kind of superior opponent. No wonder they were very amazed.

They actually did not know that to neutralize these three stances of nine styles, Zhang Wuji was forced to exhaust his entire strength. So as he was standing on the fluctuating pine-tree branch, he took the opportunity to regulate the troubled internal energy [orig. zhen1 qi4 - genuine breath] in his 'dan tian' [pubic region].

The martial arts Zhang Wuji used just now consisted of Jiu Yang Shen Gong, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, and Taiji Quan, three major divine skills, but for the final somersault in midair, he used the technique he learned from the engraving of the Sheng Huo Ling.

Although the three Shaolin eminent monks possessed unique skill in martial arts, they had been living in seclusion for decades; they did not follow the human affairs. Obviously, they had never seen even one of these four martial arts. They vaguely felt, however, that his internal energy was somewhat similar to Shaolin Jiu Yang energy, yet it also felt far superior to Shaolin's divine energy in a subtle way. As they heard him introducing his own name, who was unexpectedly the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, the admiration and surprise they felt

earlier immediately turned into rage.

The old monk with deathly-pale face spitefully said, "Lao Na [lit. old cassock - referring to self] was wondering which martial art expert descended down to pay us a visit; turns out it is the big devil head of the Devil Cult. Lao Na, three brothers, have shut ourselves up for dozens of years, ignoring the mundane affairs of this world. Even our own Sect's important business usually eludes our attention. Today by chance we get to meet the Devil Cult's leader; that is truly the good fortune we couldn't even hope for in our lifetimes."

To hear him mentioning the words 'devil head' and 'Devil Cult' left and right, it was obvious to Zhang Wuji that they bore a very deep grievance against his Cult; he could not help hesitate greatly, and was at a loss as how to reply.

He heard the yellow-faced monk with one eye say, "The Jiaozhu of the Devil Cult is Yang Dingtian! How can it be Sire?"

"Yang Jiaozhu has passed away almost thirty years ago," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Ah!" the yellow-faced old monk exclaimed, but did not say anything. He sounded shocked, as if he was utterly crushed and broken-hearted.

Zhang Wuji thought, "He looks exceedingly grieved to hear about Yang Jiaozhu's death. His friendship with Yang Jiaozhu in the past must be very deep. Yifu was Yang Jiaozhu's subordinate. Perhaps I can bring up the old friendship and then tell them how Yuan Zhen bore a deep hatred toward Yang Jiaozhu, and I'll see what happen." Thereupon he said, "Da Shi [reverend - grand master] must have known Yang Jiaozhu then?"

“Of course I do,” the yellow-faced old monk replied, “If Lao Na did not know the great hero [the word here is ‘da ying xiong’] Yang Dingtian, how could I turn into a one-eyed man? Why would we, three martial brothers, have to sit in suffering for more than thirty years?”

He said those words matter-of-factly, but the extreme pain and deep hatred behind those words were obvious. Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, “Bad! It’s bad!” He understood that this old monk’s eye went bad under Yang Dingtian’s hands, so the three martial brothers lived in seclusion for the last thirty years of their lives, making a painstaking effort, was to avenge this enmity. No wonder they were greatly disappointed to hear the death of their archenemy.

The yellow-faced old monk suddenly let out a clear whistle and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, Lao Na’s Buddhist name is Du E [lit. crossing distress]. This white-faced Shidi [younger martial brother] is Du Jie [lit. crossing calamity]. This black-faced Shidi is Du Nan [lit. crossing difficulty]. Since Yang Dingtian [his given name means ‘top of the sky’] has died, our three people’s deep hatred and great resentment must fall into the current Jiaozhu. Our martial nephews, Kong Jian and Kong Xing have died under your honorable Cult’s hands. Since you dare to come over here, you must be a fearless man. As for the dozens of years gratitude and grudges, let our martial art skills be the judge.”

Zhang Wuji said, “Junior [wan3 bei4] does not have any enmity against your precious Sect. I come here to rescue Yifu, Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia. Although Kong Jian Shen Seng [divine monk] accidentally perished under my Yifu’s hands, the background story is rather complicated. As for Kong Xing Shen Seng’s death, it has nothing to do with my humble Cult. The three of you cannot listen only to one side of the story. You must be able to discern right from wrong.”

The white-faced old monk, Du Jie, said, "So according to you, who harmed Kong Xing?"

Zhang Wuji frowned and said, "According to Junior's understanding, Kong Xing Shen Seng died under the imperial family's Ruyang Palace's warrior."

"Who is the leader of the Ruyang Palace's warriors?" Du Jie asked.

"The daughter of the Ruyang Prince," Zhang Wuji replied, "Her Han name is Zhao Min."

"I heard from Yuan Zhen," Du Jie continued, "That this girl has joined hands with your honorable Cult. She has abandoned her royalty, abandoned her father, and defected to the Ming Cult. Is it true?" He was aggressively pressing on step by step.

Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but said, "That's right, she ... right now, she ... she has crossed from darkness to light."

In a loud voice Du Jie said, "The killer of Kong Jian is the Ming Cult's Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. The killer of Kong Xing is the Ming Cult's Zhao Min. This same Zhao Min has also broken into the Shaolin Temple, captured our Temple's disciples. The worst of it all, she went as far as engraving insulting words on our revered sixteen Luohan idols. If we add my Shixiong's [older martial brother] eyeball to those offenses, the three of us bear a hundred years of grievance. Zhang Jiaozhu, if we do not settle this debt with you, then with whom?"

Zhang Wuji heaved a deep sigh, thinking that since he had

decided to shelter Zhao Min, her previous excessively wicked deeds could only be heaped on his head. In that blink of an eye, he suddenly understood his father's feelings when he committed suicide when confronted with his beloved wife's former crimes. He thought that as the settlement of Yang Jiaozhu and Yifu's enmity from the past until today, "Du Jie is right: If I do not undertake it, who would?" He stood straight up, sending his strength to his foot, and the bobbing tree branch he was standing up suddenly stayed still. In a loud voice he said, "Since the three honorable masters say so, Wanbei cannot run away from this responsibility. Then only Wanbei, one person, can accept all offenses. But as Yifu harming Kong Jian Shen Seng, there were innumerable difficulties surrounding that event. I am asking three honorable masters not to hold him accountable."

Du E said, "What do you depend on that you dare to plead for Xie Xun? Do you think we, three martial brothers, will not kill you?"

Zhang Wuji thought that as things had come this far, he must fight to the end; he said, "With one against three, Wanbei is definitely not your match. Which one of the three honorable masters will grant instruction to me?"

Du Jie said, "Fighting one to one, we cannot defeat you. This is about an enmity as deep as the sea, we don't have to follow Jianghu custom. Good devil head, come to receive your death. Amitabha Buddha!"

As he invoked the name of Buddha, Du E and Du Nan spoke in chorus, "May Buddha shows mercy!" Three black ropes flew in a flash to coil around his body.

Zhang Wuji dropped down to evade the ropes, but before his feet touch the ground, he flipped midair and charged toward

Du Nan. Du Nan raised his left palm; with an abrupt turn of his palm, a strong gust of wind attacked Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. Zhang Wuji turned sideways to evade; using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi on his palm he ward off the attack. In the meantime, Du E and Du Jie's pair of black ropes curled down on him. Zhang Wuji smoothly skated half a circle. Du Jie waved his left palm and launched a noiseless attack.

Zhang Wuji moved from tree to tree, sending attack after attack. Suddenly his palm hacked down, several hundred raindrops, as big as soybeans, flew toward Du E, carrying a strong gale of wind. Du E leaned his head sideways to evade, but dozens of raindrops still hit his face so he felt pain nonetheless. "Good kid!" he shouted. The black rope shook. It made two circles in the air and struck down toward the top of Zhang Wuji's head. Zhang Wuji flew like an arrow to avoid the circle of rope and attack Du Jie at the same time.

The more he fought, the more alarmed he became, as he felt his body was surrounded by the airstream from the three black ropes and the gust of wind generated by the three palms, which gradually tightened around him like glue. Ever since he started teaching himself martial art, he had never met such superior opponents like these three monks. Not only their stances very complicated, the abundance of their internal energy was matchless.

At first, Zhang Wuji was still able to use 70% of his strength in defense and 30% for offense. More than 200 stances, however, he started to feel that his pure and clear internal energy gradually turned muddy that in order to survive he could only defend and not attack at all. His Jiu Yang Shen Gong was actually unlimited; the more he used it, the stronger he was. But right now, every move he made consumed enormous internal energy that little by little he felt his stamina decrease. Actually, it was also because he

had never had this kind of experience ever since he trained the Shen Gong [divine skill/strength].

After several dozens more stances, Zhang Wuji thought, "If I keep fighting, I will only deliver my life in vain. I'd better escape today, and come back with Grandfather [orig. wai4 gong1 - maternal grandfather], Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary], Fan You Shi [right emissary], and Wei Fu Wang [bat king]. With five of us joining forces, I am sure we will defeat these three monks. At that time we will be able to rescue Yifu."

Immediately he sent three stances attack toward Du E in his attempt to break out of the encirclement. Unexpectedly, the circle of three long black ropes was as tight as copper wall or iron rampart. Several times he attacked, each time he was pushed back and was unable to get out. He was greatly shocked. "Turns out these three monks collaborate as one individual," he thought, "Can anyone in the world really achieve this kind of interlinked minds?"

He did not know that Du E, Du Jie and Du Nan, three monks had spent more than thirty years sitting in meditation together. Their biggest skill was in using the 'interlinked minds'. As one person moved, the other two understood his intention immediately. This 'telepathic' skill sounded mysterious, but these three men had been together in one room for more than thirty years; concentrating in interaction with each other in training, so it was not surprising that their minds could react as one person.

Zhang Wuji further thought, "If that is the case, then although Grandfather and the others come together, we might still be unable to breakthrough these three men's interlinked minds. Could it be that in the end my Yifu is beyond deliverance? That I will lose my life today?"

As he was anxious, his focus was slightly dispersed, his shoulder was swept by Du Jie's five fingers, and the pain entered the bones and marrows. He mused, "My own death is nothing to be regretted, but Yifu's injustice must be washed clean. Yifu has always been a proud man. Since he has fallen into others' hands, he will not utter half a word to defend himself." Thereupon, in a clear voice he said, "Three Old Honorable Masters, since Wanbei has stranded over here today, my life is difficult to protect. A real man is not afraid of death. What else can I say? There is one matter I need to clarify, though ..."

'Whoosh! Whoosh!' two black ropes came from left and right. Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and pull to the right, warding off the incoming force away, while continuing, "That Yuan Zhen's real civilian name was Cheng Kun, his title was Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou [Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation]. He was my Yifu, Xie Xun's master ..."

The three Shaolin eminent monks noticed how he warded off their forces while spitting out words at the same time. It was a kind of internal energy cultivation they themselves were not able to master. They could not help but feel more alarmed. The three monks recognized the Ming Cult was the 'stop-at-no-evil' Devil Cult. The higher the Jiaozhu's martial art skill, the higher their capacity to harm others would be. Seeing that currently he fell into the tight encirclement and unable to escape, they decided to seize the opportunity. Only, their endeavor would need unlimited efforts. Therefore, without saying anything, they intensified the black ropes and their palms attacks.

Zhang Wuji continued talking, "Three Old Honorable Masters must understand, this Cheng Kun's Shimei [younger martial sister] was the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu Yang Dingtian's wife. Cheng Kun had some feeling toward his Shimei, thus he

became jealous and eventually his jealousy turned into deep hatred toward the Ming Cult ...”

Thereupon as his hands were busy fending off the three monks’ stances, his mouth did not stop recounting, from the beginning to the end, how Cheng Kun schemed to destroy the Ming Cult, how he made illicit rendezvous with Mrs. Yang, which finally caused Yang Ding Tian’s demise, how he faked drunkenness and molested Xie Xun’s wife and killed his entire family, how he compelled Xie Xun to randomly massacre Wulin people, how he took Kong Jian Shen Seng as his master and deliberately lured him to take thirteen fists from Xie Xun, but he did not appear and in the end Kong Jian died with unsatisfied regret.

The more Du E, three monks heard, the more troubled their hearts were; the story appeared as it was cooked up by some criminals or barbarians, yet everything was logical and reasonable, everything fitted together perfectly. Du E was the first to relax his black rope.

Zhang Wuji also said, “Wanbei does not know how Yang Jiaozhu became enemies with Du E Dashi, but I am not surprised if there was a third party who incited disharmony between the two of you. Most likely this man was Yuan Zhen. There is no harm in Du E Dashi trying to recall past events. See if what Wanbei has said has some merit in it.”

“Hm,” Du E stopped his rope altogether. He lowered his head and pondered a moment. “That makes sense,” he finally said, “In Lao Na’s feud with Yang Dingtian, Cheng Kun did indeed play an important role. Afterwards, he wanted to take Lao Na as his master, but Lao Na had never taken any disciple, so I recommended him to Kong Jian Shizhi to be his disciple. Come to think about it, did he intentionally arrange all this?”

“Not only that,” Zhang Wuji said, “Currently, he is coveting over the Shaolin Temple Abbot position, gathering supporters outside the Temple, and cooking up a secret conspiracy to usurp Kong Wen Shen Seng ...”

He had not finished speaking when there was a loud rumbling noise as a giant boulder on the sloping hill toward their left tumbled down toward the three pine trees.

“Who’s there?” Du E shouted. The back rope in his hand flew. ‘Bang! Bang!’ it struck the boulder right on, but it only caused several chips to fly away. From behind the boulder a shadow suddenly pounced toward Zhang Wuji with an exceptional speed. A cold ray flashed as a short blade was thrust into his throat.

This attack was so sudden, and it came when Zhang Wuji was using his full-strength to block Du Jie and Du Nan, two monks’ black ropes and palm strikes. He was totally caught off guard against this sneak attack. He only felt a sharp wind in the darkness and the short blade had already reached his throat. In this critical situation he threw himself sideways, and with a ‘rip’ noise the sharp of the blade made a big cut on his clothes right on his chest. If he was a fraction of a second late, his chest and abdomen would be cut open.

As his attack failed, the attacker broke out of the three monks’ black ropes encirclement by rolling behind the giant boulder.

“Close shave!” Zhang Wuji silently cursed. He shouted, “Wicked thief Cheng Kun! Come and deal with me personally if you dare! You want to kill me to close my mouth?”

Actually, he did not see clearly the assassin who attacked him with the blade, but he knew that person’s movements

were quick, his stance was fierce, his internal energy was strong, and his martial art was somewhat similar to Xie Xun, so he presumed it was none other than Cheng Kun.

Just like three great hands, the three black ropes of the Shaolin three monks reached out toward the boulder. Wrapping and heaving, they lifted the thousand-catty giant boulder and hurled it away. But Cheng Kun had already gone down the mountain far away.

“Was it really Yuan Zhen?” Du E asked.

“Of course that was him,” Du Nan said.

Du E said, “If he did not have any guilty conscience, why would he ...”

Suddenly from all directions came repeated shouts, as seven, eight shadows arrived. The first one shouted, “Shaolin monks became Buddha disciples in vain, you have killed too many people. Aren’t you afraid the consequences of your sins? Everybody, let’s go together.”

Eight people, each with a weapon in their hands, charged toward the three monks. Zhang Wuji was still standing in the middle of the three monks. He saw that among these eight people, three wielded swords, each of the other five wielded either a saber or a whip. Each one of them possessed a high level or martial art skill. Immediately they fought the three monks’ black ropes.

After watching for a while, Zhang Wuji recognized the stances of the three people wielding swords were similar to the Qinghai Three Swords, who were killed by the Shaolin monks several days earlier. Only their changes were more subtle and their forces stronger, far above the Qinghai Three

Swords. These people must be Qinghai school's senior characters. These three people attacked Du E. The other three people fought Du Nan, and the remaining two joined hands in battling Du Jie.

Although Du Jie only fought two people, these two's martial art skill was a notch higher than the rest of the attackers. After fighting for half a day, Zhang Wuji could tell that Du Jie gradually fell under his enemies' control; while although fighting one against three, Du E seemed to be in control with his abundance internal strength.

About a dozen or so stances later, Du E was aware of the difficulty Du Jie was facing. His black rope shook, and flew toward the two men attacking Du Jie. The two men were tall and powerfully built. Their black beards floating, their movements were extremely agile. One of them held a pair of judge brushes, the other held a short pole to seal acupoints. Du E and Du Jie were several 'zhang's apart, yet Du E could feel the wind generated by these two people's weapons as if they were closed to him, proving that short weapons were inevitably more fierce than the long ones.

On the other front, the power carried by the three swords of Qinghai people was getting weaker, and they slowly fell under Du Nan's control. As it happened, Du Nan was fighting three enemies, while Du E and Du Jie two monks were fighting five enemies. For the time being, both parties were in a stalemate.

Zhang Wuji wondered in his heart, "These eight people are all martial art experts and they are not necessarily inferior to He Taichong, husband and wife. Other than the three Qinghai Pai people, I cannot figure out the school origin of the other five. Truly in this wide world, there are crouching tigers and hidden dragons among the tall grasses and thick weeds. I

wonder how many heroes and warriors are hiding quietly, whose names I have never heard of.”

After these eleven people fought for more than a hundred moves, the black ropes in the three monks of Shaolin’s hands were getting shorter. The shorter ropes required less internal energy to operate, but their agility and attacking power were also reduced several degrees. Several dozens of moves later, the three monks’ black ropes were shortened six, seven feet more. The two black-bearded old men fought closer and closer. The power behind their weapons was getting stronger and stronger. As soon as they saw a hole in their enemies’ defense, they would do their utmost to advance step-by-step, to be as close as possible to the three monks. But as their black ropes were shorter, the three monks’ defense was also tighter. The three ropes were like a circle with infinite elasticity. Each time the two black-bearded old men pressed on, they would be pushed back by the ropes.

By this time the three monks had already joined their ‘qi’ that the battle turned into three against eight. The three Shaolin monks spared no effort in fighting the enemies, but they were groaning inside. They knew that although the battle with these eight people was prolonged, they would not suffer defeat. If they used the ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan’ [Buddha’s warrior’ devil subduing ring/loop], not only eight enemies, even sixteen or thirty-two people would not be able to penetrate their defense. However, inside this ring hides a powerful enemy who would endanger them internally. If Zhang Wuji ever decided to make his move, they would be crushed from inside and outside, then the Shaolin three monks’ lives would be gone.

The three monks saw him quietly sit on the ground; apparently he was waiting for a good opportunity to strike. Perhaps he was waiting for the three monks and their

enemies to exhaust their strengths, and then gain advantage at their expense. By this time the three monks had used their internal energy to its fullest potential. They were thinking of letting a long whistle down the hill to call for help from the Shaolin Temple, but they could not open their mouths. If they uttered even a single word, the flow of their blood and 'qi' would reverse, and then if they were lucky enough not to die, they would certainly suffer internal injury and would be crippled.

In their hearts, they were scolding themselves for being too proud. If, at the first sign of powerful enemy's arrival they had raised the alarm asking reinforcement from the Temple, their victory would have been assured as soon as several masters of Damo Hall and Luohan Hall came to help.

This dire circumstance was also clearly seen by Zhang Wuji. If he wanted to take these three monks' lives at this time, it would be as easy as lifting his finger. But he thought as a real man, he should not take advantage when others were in danger. Let alone the fact that these three monks were the victims of Yuan Zhen's evil plot. Besides, if he killed them, he would still have to deal with the eight powerful enemies, which would not make his job any easier.

Knowing that victory or defeat between the two parties would not be decided for a while, he looked down to see that there was a dungeon in the ground, covered with a very big rock. All he could see was a small gap, supposedly it was the air passage for Xie Xun to breathe, and to deliver food for him. He thought that his time was limited. By the time victory and defeat between the combatants was decided, some people from the Shaolin Temple might have arrived; and then he would lost the opportunity to rescue Yifu. Thereupon he knelt down by the rock and pushed with both hands. He was able to push the giant stone slowly aside by

exerting his strength using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique.

He had not pushed the rock one foot when suddenly a strong wind came from behind, as Du Nan sent a palm strike toward his back. Zhang Wuji used the 'take off force to borrow strength'. 'Bang!' a large part of the clothes on his back tore to pieces. In the fierce wind and rainstorm, the pieces of clothes flutter in the air like butterflies; but actually he transferred Du Nan's palm strength to the giant stone. With a loud rumbling noise the stone slid about a foot. He unloaded the palm strength to the rock so that he was not injured internally, but when he took the force, his own internal energy was focused on the stone in front of him; therefore, he felt severe pain on his back.

As Du Nan launched a palm strike, he revealed a gap in the black ropes defense. One of the black-bearded old man immediately penetrated the loop. The short pole in his right hand struck toward Du Nan's left breast.

The Shaolin Three Monks' flexible rope formation was very effective for a long distance attack, but not for a close combat. Du Nan raised his left palm to ward off the attack threatening the acupoint on his chest. The black-bearded old man stretched out his left-hand index finger to pierce Du Nan's 'shan zhong xue' [lit. 'in the flock (of sheep or goats)' acupoint].

"Not good!" Du Nan cried out inwardly. He did not expect the enemy's 'yi zhi chan' [sacrificing finger] acupoint sealing technique was fiercer than his sealing acupoint pole. In this critical situation, he did not have any choice but to let go the rope in his right hand and sweep it across his chest with a strong gust of wind, and immediately launched a counterattack with his thumb, index finger and middle finger

shaped like a fan.

Although he succeeded in warding off the enemy's attack, with the black rope no longer in his hand, the old man wielding judge-pens immediately entered in his line of defense. The Shaolin Three Monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was broken.

Suddenly, the end of the black rope, which was lying on the ground, rose up just like the head of a viper ready to strike its victim. With a loud scream the rope went toward the acupoint on the face of the old man wielding the judge pens. Even before the rope arrived, the strong wind generated was enough to stop the enemy. The old man hastily raised both of his judge pens to block. As the rope and the pens collided, he was shaken and his arms went numb, the pen in his left hand almost fell off, while the pen in his right hand was diverted to strike the rock underneath. Rock chips flew as sparks splashed everywhere.

The black rope continued toward the Qinghai Pai' three swordsmen, forcing them to withdraw about a 'zhang' backwards. The 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was not only restored, the power was even greater than the original formation. The Shaolin Three Monks were pleasantly surprised, especially since they saw the other end of the rope was unexpectedly in Zhang Wuji's hand. He had never practiced the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' with them, so in term of 'interlinked minds' and moving in seamless coordination with the others, he was far inferior to Du Nan. However, his unequalled abundance internal energy was more than enough to generate an earth-shattering force to drive the enemies to withdraw in all directions.

Du E and Du Jie's black ropes also moved that together they drove the remaining seven people to fall back. In the

meantime, Du Nan focused his attention to deal with the black-bearded old man, which was a notch inferior to him both in terms of martial art and internal strength. He fought sitting inside the pine tree, and did not stand up at all. His ten fingers slapped, pierced, plucked, hooked, pointed, brushed, captured and seized, so that after several moves, the black-bearded old man repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Seeing his seven companions were not in a better situation than what he was facing, the old man bellowed and leaped out from the loop.

Zhang Wuji handed the black rope back to Du Nan, and then bending down, he used the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi again to push the giant rock another foot. He looked down into the exposed underground cave and called out, "Yifu, Child Wuji is late in rescuing you. Can you come out?"

"I am not going out," Xie Xun replied, "Good Child, get out of here, quick!"

Zhang Wuji was surprised. "Yifu," he said, "Is your acupoint sealed? Or are you bound in shackles?"

Without waiting for Xie Xun to reply, he jumped down the dungeon. 'Splash!' water splashed out. Turned out the several hours of heavy downpour had flooded the dungeon that the water reached his waist. Half of Xie Xun's body was submerged in water.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. He reached out to carry Xie Xun up. His hands groped around Xie Xun's hands and feet, but did not feel any shackles. He then massaged Xie Xun's several main acupoints, but again, he did not find any signs of anybody sealed his acupoints. Hence, he wrapped his arms around Xie Xun's body, leaped up and out of the dungeon, and sat Xie Xun on top of the giant rock by the cave opening.

"This is the best time to escape," Zhang Wuji said, "Yifu, let us leave." As he said that, he pulled Xie Xun's arm, with the intention to leave immediately. But Xie Xun kept sitting on the rock, refusing to move. Hugging his own knees he said, "Child, the gravest sin I have ever committed in my life was killing Kong Jian Dashi. If your Yifu fall into other people's hands, I would certainly fight bravely to the end. But today I become a prisoner of the Shaolin Temple, I am willing to receive the harshest punishment to pay for Kong Jian Dashi's life."

Zhang Wuji anxiously said, "But you killed Kong Jian Dashi by mistake. It was Cheng Kun, that wicked thief, who engineered such a sinister plot. Besides, Yifu's entire family's blood debt has not been restituted, how can you die under Cheng Kun's hands?"

Xie Xun sighed and said, "Everyday for more than a month, in this dungeon, I heard the three eminent monks chant their prayers, I heard the morning bell and the evening drum from the temple at the bottom of this hill, which has made me think about my past. Your Yifu's hands reek with too much innocent blood that even a hundred deaths cannot redeem it. Ay, all sorts of wickedness caused too much sin. I am more sinful than Cheng Kun. Good Child, don't mind me, just quickly go down the hill."

The more Zhang Wuji listened to him, the more anxious he was. "Yifu," he shouted, "If you don't want to go, I will force you." As he said that, he turned around and grabbed both of Xie Xun's hands; he was going to carry him on his back.

They heard clamoring noise of people coming up the mountain path, there were several people shouting, "Who dare to cause trouble at Shaolin Temple?" A dozen or so people were coming up the hill, amidst the noise of feet

splashing in the water.

Zhang Wuji was just about to grab Xie Xun's legs, ready to take him go; but suddenly the 'da zhui xue' [big spine acupoint] on his back went numb. It was Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji's hands lost their strength and he did not have any choice but to relax his grip. In his anxiety he almost cried. "Yifu," he called out, "You ... why are you being this difficult?"

"Good Child," Xie Xun replied, "The wrong I have received, you have already explained it clearly to the three eminent monks. The sins I have committed, I have to pay the retribution myself. If you are not leaving, who will avenge my grievances for me?"

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold; but he saw the dozen or so Shaolin monks wielding Buddhist staff or saber had already attacked the eight people. 'Bing, bing, bang, bang!' the noise of the close combat can be heard.

The black-bearded old man with judge pens realized that if the battle was prolonged, not only they would fail their mission at the last minute; they may find it difficult to escape alive. He was enraged that a nameless young man had spoiled their important business. With a clear voice he shouted, "I beg to know the honorable surname and the great given name of the young man in the middle of the pine trees. Hao Mi and Bo Tai of Hejian [a city in Hebei province] want to know which expert has interfered with our business today."

Raising his black rope up, Du E said, "The Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu, the number one martial art expert in the world; how can the Hejian Shuang Sha [twin evils of Hejian] not know?"

“Ah!” the judge pen wielding Hao Mi exclaimed. He raised his pair of pens up and then walked out of the loop. The other seven followed him. The Shaolin monks were about to stop them, but those eight’s martial art skill was considerably higher than the monks; side by side they proceeded going down the hill.

Du E and the others, three monks, had heard everything Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji said. They also knew that Zhang Wuji did not take advantage of their precarious situation, he simply stood on the side, did not help either side. When Bo Tai broke through their ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan’ defensive line, based on the Twin Evils of Hejian’s cruelty, the three monks would have lost their lives by now. The three monks laid down their black ropes, stood up, and put their palms together in respect. “Many thanks for Zhang Jiaozhu’s benevolence,” they said in chorus.

Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety and said, “Such an insignificant deed; is it worth mentioning?”

Du E said, “In today’s business, although Lao Na would not allow Xie Xun to accompany Zhang Jiaozhu, but Zhang Jiaozhu has just saved our lives, Lao Na would be powerless to stop you from leaving. Only Lao Na, three martial brothers, have received order from our temple’s Abbot to watch over Xie Xun. We have established a heavy oath before Buddha’s presence, unless the three of us lose our lives, we will never let Xie Xun escape. This matter concerns our Sect’s thousand years of glory or disgrace; we beg Zhang Jiaozhu to understand of our difficulty.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted, but did not say anything.

Du E continued, “About the animosity of Lao Na losing an eye, we can consider it over today. If Zhang Jiaozhu wishes to rescue Xie Xun, you may come back anytime. As long as you

can break Lao Na, three martial brothers' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan', you can take Shi Wang [lion king] go. Zhang Jiaozhu may bring as many helpers as you wish. You can take turn fighting us, or you can fight us as a group; we, three martial brothers, will accept the challenge by ourselves. Before Zhang Jiaozhu's return, Lao Na, three brothers, will guard Xie Xun carefully. We will not let Yuan Zhen to insult him even for half a sentence, or harm a single strand of his hair."

Zhang Wuji cast a glance toward Xie Xun; in the dark night he saw the silhouette of his well-built form, his long hair draped over his neck and shoulders; he was standing with lowered head, as if his heart was full of remorse over the transgressions he committed in the past. He looked totally different from his impressive, invincible former self. Zhang Wuji felt tears forming in his eyes as he considered, "I can't defeat them today, and Yifu does not want to leave. I must bring [maternal] Grandfather, Yang Zuo Shi, Fan You Shi, and the others to help me fight. This three black rope formation is as impregnable as a copper wall or iron rampart. If Du Nan Dashi did not send me a palm attack, that Bo Tai would definitely not able to break through their defense line. Even with the help of Grandfather and the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries, there is no guarantee that we can break their formation. Ay, right now, all I can do is to deal with whatever comes my way using one step at a time." Thereupon he said, "Since that is the case, I will return to receive instructions from the Three Reverends." Turning around to embrace Xie Xun's waist he said, "Yifu, your child is leaving."

Xie Xun nodded. Gently stroking Zhang Wuji's hair he said, "You don't have to come back. I have made up my mind not to leave. Good Child, I hope in everything you will turn bad luck into good fortune. Don't let the hopes of your Father and Mother and myself down. Follow your Father's example; don't

follow your Yifu's."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Both Father and Yifu are heroes and real men; upright warriors who do everything in the open. Both are Child's role models." As he said that, he bowed in respect. His shadow swayed and he flew out of the three pine trees circle. Raising his hands toward the Shaolin Temple's three monks, he launched his 'qing gong' and suddenly disappeared. They only heard his clear whistle, which in a very short time had reached about a 'li' [approx. 0.5 km] away.

The Shaolin monks standing on the peak of that hill looked at each other in astonishment. They had heard that the Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult possessed an outstanding martial art skill, but they had never expected his skill to be this divine.

Since his presence was no longer a secret, Zhang Wuji thought he might as well show his martial art skill. Perhaps the Shaolin monks would be scared and would treat Xie Xun nicely.

His whistle sound came out of his abundant 'qi'; it was a continuous whistle, which rose up above the noise of the thunderstorm. It sounded like a dragon roar as it flew through the sky. Putting his entire strength on his feet, he ran faster and faster, while his whistling was also getting louder and louder. Thousands of Shaolin monks were startled awake from their dreams. It was not until the whistle was far away they started to talk to one another. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others knew Zhang Wuji had arrived; which only served to increase their anxiety.

Zhang Wuji ran for several 'li's. Suddenly from behind a willow tree by the road side someone was calling out, "Hey!" Someone leaped out. It was Zhao Min.

Zhang Wuji stopped his whistle and halted his steps. Reaching out, he pulled her over, only to see that her whole body was dripping wet from the heavy rain; as she looked up, water streaming down from her face.

“Did you fight with the Shaolin Temple baldies?” Zhao Min asked.

“Yes,” Zhang Wuji replied.

“How is Xie Daxia?” Zhao Min asked, “Did you see him?”

Zhang Wuji pulled her arm along, and while they were strolling in the heavy rain, he told her briefly what had happened just now.

Zhao Min hesitantly asked, “Did you ask him how he got captured?”

“I was only thinking of how to help him escape,” Zhang Wuji replied, “I did not have time to mind other people’s business.”

Zhao Min sighed and no longer made any noise.

“You are not happy?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“To you, it is other people’s business, to me, it is a very serious matter,” Zhao Min replied, “All right, I’ll wait for Xie Daxia to be rescued. I don’t think it will be too late to ask him then. I am only afraid ...”

“What are you afraid of?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Are you afraid we cannot save Yifu?”

“The Ming Cult is a lot stronger than the Shaolin Pai,” Zhao Min said, “If you really want to rescue Xie Daxia, I am sure you will eventually succeed. I am only afraid that Xie Daxia is determined to die because of Kong Jian Shen Seng.”

It was exactly what had been burdening Zhang Wuji’s heart. “Do you think he is?” he asked.

“I hope he isn’t,” Zhao Min replied.

Two people walking and talking until they arrived at the Du couple’s hut. Zhao Min laughed and said, “Your real identity has been exposed, you cannot hide from these two people anymore.”

Zhang Wuji noticed that the door of the hut was half closed, so he reached out to open it. After shaking the rain water from his head and body he went in, but suddenly smelled a burst of blood. He was shocked and immediately pushed Zhao Min back out of the door with his left hand. From the dark someone’s claw was reaching out. This claw was noiseless, without creating any wind, but it was shockingly fast. In a flash the fingers had reached Zhang Wuji’s cheek. He did not have enough time to evade. His left foot flew up toward that person’s chest. The attacker pulled back his hand and his elbow struck the ‘huan tiao xue’ [lit. ‘jump-the-loop’] acupoint on Zhang Wuji’s leg with an extremely fierce and ruthless move.

Zhang Wuji knew that as soon as pulled back his leg slightly, the enemy’s left hand would immediately scoop out his pair of eyeballs. Therefore, he feigned a grab toward the enemy’s hand, expecting the enemy to pull back his elbow, but unexpectedly his grab was successful. He took the enemy’s left hand in his palm, but right at that moment, his ‘huan tiao xue’ went numb; he could not stand and was forced to kneel

down on his right leg.

He was about to seize the opportunity by wrenching the enemy's wrist when he suddenly realized the hand in his palm was soft, warm and smooth. It was a woman's hand. His heart was stirred and he did not have the heart to treat her with a heavy hand. He lifted that person up and flung her outside. 'Stab', he felt a severe pain on his right shoulder as it was pierced by a knife.

As the enemy leaped out of the room, her palm struck toward Zhao Min's face. Zhang Wuji knew Zhao Min would not be able to block it and would be killed on the spot. Thereupon, enduring the pain, he leaped up and sent out his palm to parry. 'Bang' two palms collided. That person's body swayed, her feet staggered; but borrowing the momentum, she continued moving backward and ran several 'zhang's out, and then disappeared into the darkness.

"Who was that?" Zhao Min was still in shock.

"Hey," Zhang Wuji mumbled. He tried to light a fire, but the flint inside his pocket was soaked wet from the heavy rain; he could not start the fire. Afraid that the enemy's knife on his right shoulder was poisonous, he did not dare to pull it up.

"Light up the lamp," he said.

Zhao Min went to the kitchen to get a flint and lighted the oil lamp. She was shocked to see the short knife on his shoulder. Zhang Wuji saw that the blade of the knife was without poison.

"Only a flesh wound," he laughed, "Nothing to worry about."

As he turned his head and pulled the knife out, he saw Du

Baidang and Yi Sanniang curled up on the corner of the room. Ignoring the blood oozing out of his wound, he rushed to look; the couple had died for a while.

Zhao Min was scared. "They were still fine when I went out," she said.

Zhang Wuji nodded. As Zhao Min wrapped his wound, he took up the short knife and examined it. It was precisely the weapon the Du couple used. He looked around the room, and saw on the beam, on the pillars, on the table, on the ground, everywhere, there were short blades scattered around. Apparently, the enemy engaged the Du couple in fierce battle, forcing them to use up their blades one by one, and then began to injure them.

"This person's martial art is very fierce," Zhao Min said in amazement.

If Zhang Wuji was not quick enough in the battle in the dark just now, that person would have had gouged his eyes. Not only he would have been a blind man, but most likely Zhao Min and he would be lying on the ground, dead. He looked back at the bodies of the Du couple. Dozens of ribs on their chests were broken, as were ribs on their backs. It was obvious that the martial art which killed them was very cruel, with a very powerful palm strength behind it. He had fought countless archenemies, undergone many dangerous situations, yet thinking back about the quick-paced, three-stance close combat in the dark room, he could not restrain from shivering in fear. He had fought two vicious battles tonight; the first was one against three, which lasted for a long time. But speaking of soul-stirring and hair-rising battle, it was nothing compared to the second one, which lasted for a twinkling of the eye.

“Who was that?” Zhao Min asked again.

Zhang Wuji shook his head without answering. Suddenly Zhao Min understood. Her eyes grew big in fright. After staring blankly for half a day, she threw herself into Zhang Wuji’s bosom and wept in fear. They both knew that if Zhao Min did not hear Zhang Wuji’s whistle and came out amidst the heavy rain to welcome him, and thus escape the great catastrophe, right now on the corner of the room there would not only be two corpses, but three.

Zhang Wuji gently patted her back and consoled her in gentle voice. Zhao Min said, “That person’s target must be me; she killed the Du couple first, and then hid to set up an ambush against me. She simply did not mean to harm you.”

“You must not leave my side these next several days,” Zhang Wuji said. After thinking for a while he muttered, “How could her internal energy and martial art skill advance so rapidly in less than a year? I am afraid nobody in this world other than myself will be able to protect you.”

The next morning, Zhang Wuji took Du Baidang’s hoe and dug a deep hole to bury the Du couple. Together with Zhao Min they kneeled and bowed to express their respect. Recalling how Yi Sanniang had treated the two of them with loving care, they could not help but feel grief.

Suddenly from far away, from the direction of Shaolin Temple they heard a faint continuous ‘dang, dang’ sound. It sounded very urgent. At the same moment, from the east a blue-green rocket shot to the sky; from the south a red rocket, from the west white, and from the north black, while from several ‘li’s away they saw yellow smoke rise up. These five rockets and smoke encircled the Shaolin Temple in the middle.

“The Ming Cult’s Five-element Flags have arrived!” Zhang Wuji called out, “And they are going to deal with the Shaolin Pai frontally. Let’s go quickly.” Hurriedly they changed their clothes, washed the mud from their hands and faces, and walked quickly toward the Shaolin Temple.

Walking for only a few ‘li’s, they saw a company of white-clothed Ming Cult army, with small yellow banners in their hands, going up the mountain.

“Is Yan Qi Shi [Flag leader Yan] here?” Zhang Wuji called out.

As the leader of the Hou-tu Qi [thick earth flag/banner], Yan Yuan heard the call, he turned around and saw his Jiaozhu. In his delight, he quickly came forward to pay his respects. The people serving under him were also expressed their delights in thunderous voices and bowed down together.

Yan Yuan reported: As the leaderships of the Ming Cult learned about Xie Xun’s whereabouts, they held a discussion and decided that if they waited for the Duan Yang Festival to ask for Xie Xun, all the heroes under the Heaven would have flocked to the Shaolin Temple, then the Ming Cult would have to face the world’s heroes as their enemies. Since they were not able to report to their Cult Leader, they were forced to take the matter into their own hands. Thereupon, ten days before the Duan Yang Festival, Yang Xiao and Fan Yao led the masters of the Cult to the Shaolin Temple to ask for Xie Xun. They expected an open war would be unavoidable, but after looking everywhere, they could not find their Cult Leader, so the group of warriors felt like a dragon without a head.

The Ming Cult people blew the bugle, announcing the arrival of their Cult Leader; so not too long afterwards, Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang, Zhou Dian, Peng Yingyu, Shou Bude, Priest Tie Guan, and the others

came one after another, while the Rui Jin [acute gold/metal], Ju Mu [gigantic tree], Hong Shui [flooding water], and Lie Huo [blazing fire], four banners were surrounding the Shaolin Temple on all sides. As they saw each other, everybody broke into delightful chatter.

Yang Xiao and Fan Yao admitted their guilt for acting without authorization. Zhang Wuji said, "You don't have to be too modest. Everybody with one mind join forces to rescue Xie Fa Wang. That shows our Cult's brethrens have a strong spirit of brotherhood [yi4qi4]. Everybody appreciates what we are doing, why do you feel guilty?"

He told everybody briefly how he went undercover and mingled among the Shaolin Temple's workers, and how last night he battled with Du E three monks. As they heard Cheng Kun was behind everything, plotting and scheming, they were all furious. Zhou Dian and Priest Tie Guan shouted some curse words.

Zhang Wuji said, "Today our Cult is paying a formal visit to ask Shaolin Fangzhang [Abbot] to release the prisoner. It is best if we do not injure our friendship. We will fight only out of absolute necessity. Our goal first and foremost is saving Xie Fa Wang, next, we want to apprehend Cheng Kun. Other than that we should not harm the innocents." The people acknowledged the order in one voice.

"Min Mei," to Zhao Min Zhang Wuji said, "In order to avoid more trouble, it will be best if you would be in disguise, don't let the Shaolin Temple monks to recognize your true identity." Since she took the Shaolin monks prisoners to Dadu, she had sowed an extremely deep enmity with Shaolin Pai.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Yan Dage [big brother Yan], let

me pose as one of the brothers under your command!”

Yan Yuan immediately ordered one of his men to get the uniform for Zhao Min to wear. She quickly went to the woods behind the mountain and hurriedly put on the uniform and applied black grease onto her face. When she went out of the woods, she turned into a mean and ferocious thin man with a black face.

The bugle sounded again, the Ming Cult warriors went up the mountain in neat formation. Earlier that day, the Shaolin Temple had received the Ming Cult’s visiting card. Eminent Monk Kong Zhi, leading a group of monks, had been waiting at the pavilion in front of the Temple.

Because of Yuan Zhen, Kong Zhi was convinced that when the Shaolin monks were captured by deceit and brought to Dadu as prisoners, when their fingers were broken after they were forced to show their martial art skills, it was all part of the conspiracy between the Ming Cult and the Ruyang Palace. Later on, when Zhang Wuji came and rescued them, it was also part of the sinister plot to curry their favors. Therefore, he received the guests with a gloomy look. He put his palms together in respect, but did not say anything.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, “Our humble Cult has a favor we’d like to ask in earnest from your precious Sect. For that reason, we are going up the mountain to pay our respect to the Fangzhang Shen Seng [Abbot Divine Monk].”

Kong Zhi nodded. “Please!” he said, and he led the Ming Cult warriors walk toward the gate.

Abbot Kong Wen, accompanied by the Damo Hall, Luohan Hall, Banruo [great wisdom] Hall, and Jielu [monastic discipline] Courtyard, all senior monks, was waiting outside the door to greet the guests. He took the warriors into the Da

Xiong Bao Dian [great hero precious hall] and invited them to sit down. Immediately several young monks appeared to serve them tea. After exchanging some pleasantries with Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others, Kong Wen was silent.

“Fangzhang Shen Seng,” Zhang Wuji said, “We would not go up to the San Bao Dian [three-treasure hall] if this wasn’t an important matter. We come here to ask earnestly that Fangzhang would honor the Wulin way by releasing our humble Cult’s Xie Fa Wang. We will certainly repay this great kindness and great benevolence someday.”

“Amitufo,” Kong Wen said, “Those who left homes [Buddhist monk or nun] must have mercy as their life principle. We must shun anger and avoid murder; actually, we should not make things difficult for Xie Fa Wang. However, Lao Na Shixiong [martial brother] Kong Jian perished under Xie Shizhu’s [benefactor Xie] hands. Zhang Jiaozhu is the leader of a cult, you must understand the custom of the Wulin world.”

Zhang Wuji said, “There was another reason behind it, we must not blame Xie Fa Wang.” Thereupon he narrated how Kong Jian willingly received some beatings in his attempt to reconcile a great enmity in the Wulin world.

As Kong Wen and the others heard to the middle of the story, he exclaimed praises to Buddha, and stood up at once to show his respect.

With tears in his eyes, Kong Wen said in a trembling voice, “Shanzai, Shanzai! Kong Jian Shixiong willingly put this benevolent and self-sacrificing principle into practice; his virtue was not small.”

The rest of the monks chanted scripture verses in low voice, praising Kong Jian's chivalry and righteousness; there wasn't anybody who did not admire him. The Ming Cult warriors also stood up to show their respects.

Zhang Wuji narrated in detail what had happened that day, and said, "Xie Fa Wang injured Kong Jian Shen Seng by mistake; he deeply regretted it. But if we think over it carefully, the real master mind behind this crime was your precious Temple's Yuan Zhen Dashi." Noticing that Yuan Zhen was not in the Hall, he said, "Would you ask Yuan Zhen Dashi to come out? Let us meet face to face and resolve right from wrong."

"That's right!" Zhou Dian opened his mouth, "This bald donkey [derogatory term for Buddhist monks] feigned death on the Brightness Peak, but actually he is alive and well. What is he up to, being sneaky like that? Quickly tell him to roll out." He had suffered a great setback from Yuan Zhen on the Brightness Peak, so he still bore a grudge against him.

"Mr. Zhou," Zhang Wuji busily said, "You shouldn't be rude in front of Fangzhang Dashi."

Zhou Dian said, "I was cursing that bald donkey Yuan Zhen, not cursing the bald Fangzhang ..." As the word 'bald' came out of his mouth, he knew something was wrong; hastily he put his hands on his mouth.

As Kong Zhi listened to Zhou Dian's rude remarks, he was even more indignant. "In that case, how would Zhang Jiaozhu explain the death of my Kong Xing Shidi?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji replied, "Kong Xing Shen Seng was a frank and upright hero; I [orig. zai4xia4 - under] had the privilege of visiting with him on the Brightness Peak. I admired him very

much. Kong Xing Dashi had agreed to meet with me again in the future to discuss martial art. Who would have thought that the unfortunate Master had met a terrible fate? I deeply regret his passing. It was a sinister plot of some traitors; it has nothing to do with our humble Cult.”

Kong Zhi laughed coldly and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, it seems like you are washing your hands really clean. Then the news that the Ruyang Prince’s Junzhu has joined hands with the Ming Cult is also a false rumor?”

Zhang Wuji blushed and said, “Junzhu has had some disagreement with her Father and Brother, and has joined our humble Cult. In her former days, Junzhu has done a great deal of irreverence toward your precious Temple. I will ask her to go up the mountain to pay her respect to Buddha and seriously apologize.”

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Kong Zhi was shouting, “Your words are sweet but insincere; how can it be that easy? You are a leader of a Cult, yet you are talking nonsense. Aren’t you afraid you will be the laughingstock of the heroes all over the world?”

Zhang Wuji realized that the murder of Kong Xing and the captured of numerous monks were certainly Zhao Min gravest offense. Although she had done it without the Ming Cult’s knowledge, presently she entrusted herself to him. Apparently, he could not make any excuses that he had nothing to do with her.

While he was in an awkward situation, Priest Tie Guan said with a stern voice, “Kong Zhi Dashi, our Jiaozhu respects you as a senior eminent monk, he is giving you a face; therefore, you should not press too hard. Our Jiaozhu always keep his promises and holds justice in high regard, how can he tell any lie? Your insult to our Jiaozhu means insult to our million

Ming Cult disciples. Our Jiaozhu is broad-minded and generous; he might not want to argue, but we, his subordinates, may not want to let it go.”

By that time, the Ming Cult army had besieged towns and occupied lands around the Huai Si and Henan, Hubei area. They recruited soldiers and built up cavalries, so when he said ‘a million disciples’, he was not exaggerating.

With a cold laugh Kong Zhi said, “So what if you have a million disciples? Are you going to destroy Shaolin Temple to the ground? The Devil Cult has insulted our Shaolin and we have not repaid that disgrace until today. We were captured, and then held captives at the Wan An Temple; we can only blame our own negligence. Evil and righteous do not coexist; that fact we understand well. But you came to our Shaolin Temple and on the back of our sixteen revered Luohan idols you carved sixteen large characters. Hey, hey, ‘Destroy Shaolin first, then overthrow Wudang, only our Ming Cult fits to rule the Wulin world!’ How impressive! Such a fart!”

Those sixteen characters were carved on the back of the sixteen revered Luohan images with some kind of sharp tool by Zhao Min’s warriors after the captured Shaolin monks had been taken away. Afterwards, Fan Yao waited until everybody had left, and flew back to the Luohan Hall. He turned the sixteen revered Luohan images back, so that their backs were against the wall. His goal was to thwart Zhao Min’s plan of shifting the blame to the Ming Cult. Later on, Yang Xiao and the others knew something was amiss and they saw the carving on the backs of the Luohan images, but they had never expected the Shaolin monks would also find out about it.

Zhang Wuji had never been known as an eloquent man. Besides, he thought that it was Zhao Min who deliberately

stirred up trouble; he was inwardly ashamed and did not know how to answer. It was Yang Xiao who answered Kong Zhi.

“We don’t understand what Kong Zhi Dashi was saying,” he said, “Our humble Cult’s Zhang Jiaozhu is the son of Wudang disciple, Zhang Wuxia [fifth hero Zhang]. It is not a secret in the Jianghu. Even if we were ten thousand times more arrogant than we are, we would never dare to insult Jiaozhu’s elders. How can our Zhang Jiaozhu himself make the ‘overthrow Wudang’ inscription? Fangzhang Dashi and Kong Zhi Dashi are highly virtuous eminent monks, how can you not understand such a simple logic like this? I am [orig. zai4xia4] convinced that there is no such thing.” His words were refined and thought provoking, rendering Kong Zhi speechless.

Abbot Kong Wen was a man of learning and wisdom; his disposition was also kind. He realized that in the end, the situation was not advantageous for them. He knew the Ming Cult had great influence; if both sides engaged in serious battle, he was afraid the thousand years of Shaolin history, which was passed on from generation to generation, would unavoidably end in his hand. Therefore, he said, “It’s useless for us to debate endlessly; please follow Lao Na to visit the Luohan Hall. We’ll look at the Luohan images reverently, and then we’ll know who’s right and who’s wrong.”

Zhang Wuji mused, “As soon as we enter the Luohan Hall, the truth will be revealed.” Hence, he hesitated and did not immediately give his consent.

“That is a good idea,” Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji did not understand Yang Xiao’s intention, but seeing Zhao Min stayed with the ‘Hou Tu’ Flag members and

did not enter the Temple at all, he thought that there was little chance she would be found out by the Shaolin monks, so he had nothing to worry about.

The monk in charge of receiving the guests led the way, and everybody followed him in single file, walking toward the Luohan Hall. Kong Wen bowed down in front of the Luohan images and said, "Disciple is disturbing the revered Luohan, please forgive me." Then he stood up and ordered six disciples to respectfully turn an idol around.

The six disciples went forward as instructed. After they clasped their palms together and uttered a silent prayer, with three men on each side, they lifted the first Luohan idol and turned it around. But not even a scratch was found on the back of this Luohan. Formerly, there was a large 'xian' character ['first '] on the golden lacquer, but right now there was not the least bit of trace of the character. Not only Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others were surprised, even Zhang Wuji himself was stunned.

Shaolin disciples moved together, they turned the Luohan over one by one, but there was not even a half stroke of character on the back of these Luohans. The Shaolin disciples were speechless; they looked at each other in astonishment. They had clearly seen there was a large character engraved on the back of each Luohan, which together, they read 'xian zhu Shaolin, zai mie Wudang, wei wo Mingjiao, wulin chen wang' [Destroy Shaolin first, then overthrow Wudang, only our Ming Cult fits to rule the Wulin world]. But were did those sixteen characters go?

The golden lacquer on the back of these Luohans looked new; it was obvious that the lacquer had just been applied. But for the last several months, the security in and around Shaolin Temple was very tight. To fix the writing on the back

of these sixteen Luohans, and then re-apply the golden lacquer, was indeed not a simple thing to do. How could no monk in the Temple know about it?

Zhang Wuji turned his head around and saw Wei Yixiao and Fan Yao looked at each other with suppressed smile on their faces. His heart was stirred; he realized it must be his fellow Cult brothers who went into action. "Whoever is doing this must be very resourceful and have a vast knowledge," he mused.

Seeing the bewildered looks on the monks' faces, Yang Xiao said, "Your precious Temple's good fortune is very deep; there is no end to your virtuous beneficence. Sixteen revered golden images are in perfect condition. As Kong Zhi Dashi said, these idols suffered some vandalism, but the sixteen Luohans are obviously divine, their virtue boundless, they are able to fix themselves. It truly is a reason for us to celebrate."

As he said that, he bent his knees and kowtowed toward the Luohans. Zhang Wuji and the others also followed his example and kowtowed.

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others did not believe such nonsense as the Luohans were divine, having boundless virtue that they were able to fix themselves up. They guessed it must be the Ming Cult who surreptitiously did this. Regardless of what happened, however, it showed that the Ming Cult was trying to make amends to their Temple; knowing this, they could not restrain a third of the anger in their hearts from melting away. But, thinking about how these devil heads were able to come and go like ghosts, they felt 30% admirations and 30% fears.

"Since the Luohan idols are as good as new, we should not mention this matter again," Kong Wen said. Waving his hand,

he ordered Shaolin disciples to turn those Luohan back to their original positions.

“Last night, Zhang Jiaozhu has visited us and has made an acquaintance with Lao Na’s three martial uncles,” Kong Wen continued, “I heard Du E Shishu and Zhang Jiaozhu have come to an agreement; as long as Zhang Jiaozhu is able to break my three Shishu’s ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Juan’, you can take Xie Shizhu away.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Du E Dashi did say that. But I [orig, zai4xia4] have a deep admiration to the three eminent monks’ profound martial art skill. In all honesty, I know I am their match. I had suffered defeat under three eminent monks’ hands last night. How can the general of a defeated army dare to speak bravely?”

“Amitufo,” Kong Wen said, “Zhang Jiaozhu’s words are too heavy. Victory or defeat of last night has not been decided yet. Furthermore, Jiaozhu’s kindness and chivalry in helping them have left a deep impression on the three Shishu’s hearts.”

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, and the others had heard from Zhang Wuji how Du E and the other two monks possessed such an amazing martial art skill. Naturally, they wanted to see it with their own eyes.

Yin Tianzheng said, “Since the Shaolin eminent monks insist on seeing who is superior in the martial art study, Jiaozhu, I think forgetting our own inadequacy, we should follow their request and we ask instruction from the Shaolin Pai. Besides, that is the only way we can save Xie Xiongdi [brother Xie]. We are compelled to do this. It’s not like we deliberately want to challenge Shaolin Temple’s supremacy in the Wulin world.”

Zhang Wuji had always held his grandfather's opinion in high regards; besides, Yin Tianzheng was right, they had no other choice. Thereupon he said, "My brothers have heard how I praised the three eminent monks' divine skill as unrivalled; they said the three eminent monks have been living in seclusion for decades that nobody in the Wulin world knew about them. Now that we are fortunate enough to pay a visit, it would be our lifelong happiness to be able to meet with them."

"Please!" Kong Zhi raised his hand and led the group of warriors toward the hill behind the Temple.

The 'Hong Shui' Flag of the Ming Cult, under the leadership of Tang Yang, had arranged themselves, forming a formidable wall around the hill. But Kong Wen and the others seemed oblivious to their presence; they kept walking toward the peak. Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, with clasped palms, walked toward the three pine trees, bowed and reported to their elders.

Du E said, "The enmity against Yang Dingtian has been resolved last night. The affair of the Luohan idols has also been resolved today. Very good, very good. Zhang Jiaozhu, are you all coming here to fight?"

Yang Xiao and the others noticed the three monks' were short and skinny. Sitting inside the hollow trunks, they looked like corpses. Yet as he spoke, Du E's voice resounded in the mountain and valley. It was obvious that his internal strength was very deep. They could not help their faces from changing.

Zhang Wuji pondered in his heart, "Last night I was alone, hence I could not defeat them. Today I have many people with me. If we rely on number in fighting them, first, I might

not be able to unleash my skill to the fullest, second, even if we won, we will demean our own Cult's prestige. Too many people won't look good, too few people won't achieve anything. I think the best way would be three of us against three of them. Fair and square." Thereupon he said, "I have experience three eminent monks' divine skill last night; my heart is full of admiration. I do not dare to show off my shameful skill in front of the three of you. But Xie Fa Wang has shown me fatherly love; he is also a good friend and a brother to my brethrens here. Even if we have to overestimate our own strength, we must try to save him. I am thinking of asking two of my Cult brethrens to help, so that we will fight three against three; that way, we are receiving instruction on a level ground."

"Zhang Jiaozhu does not need to be modest," Du E dryly said, "If in your precious Cult you have someone whose seniority in martial art comprehension second only to Jiaozhu, then you need only one more person to kill us, the three old baldies. But if Lao Na's presumption is correct, there will not be any second person with skills as high as Jiaozhu's to be found in the world. In that case, it doesn't matter if you have more people or less people; all of you can come up together."

Zhou Dian, Priest Tie Guan, and the others looked at each other. They all thought this old bald donkey was very arrogant, by going as far as regarding the world's heroes as nothing. However, they also realized that they were praising Zhang Jiaozhu by saying that nobody in the world could be considered on par with him; so they were being polite after all. Zhou Dian was about to open his mouth to speak, but Shuo Bude's hand was quicker; it reached out to cover Zhou Dian's mouth.

Zhang Wuji said, "Our humble Cult is considered heretical [orig. pang2 men2 zuo3 dao4 - lit. side door, left way] and

not worthy to be compared to your precious Sect's prestigious name, but with our several hundred years of establishment, we do have some talented people. It was by chance that I am appointed the interim Cult Leader. In reality, in term of ability, insight and martial art skill, within my humble Cult, we do not lack people who are superior to me. Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei], please deliver this visiting card to the three eminent monks." As he said that, he took out a piece of visiting card, which listed Zhang Wuji's name on the top, and then Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, down to everybody who came to pay a visit.

Wei Yixiao knew the Cult Leader wanted him to demonstrate his unparalleled-in-the-present-age 'qing gong', to show the Shaolin monks that they should not belittle the Ming Cult characters. Immediately he bowed to accept the order. After taking the visiting card, without straightening up his back or even turning around, his body flew backward, as smooth as floating smoke. He covered the several 'zhang's distance as if he was skating on ice. As he got to the pine tree, he handed over the visiting card to Du E with both hands.

Du E and the others only saw his shadow sway, and Wei Yixiao had suddenly appeared in their presence. They had never seen 'qing gong' this exquisite; much less he was flying backwards, which was even unthinkable to them. They could not help but praised, "Good 'qing gong'!"

The crowd of Shaolin monks also knew a good thing when they see one, so they broke out in applause. Although the crowd of Ming Cult warriors had already aware of Wei Yixiao's excellent 'qing gong', it was the first time for them to see he fly backwards like that. Only, they felt uncomfortable to praise their own people openly, so even though their hearts were full of admiration, they restrained themselves from saying anything. Only Zhou Dian applauded noisily.

Du E slightly leaned his body forward and stretched out his hand to receive the visiting card. The five fingers of his right hand grabbed the card, and Wei Yixiao felt tingling sensation in his entire body, as if he was stricken by a thunder; his chest was burning, suddenly he felt weak. In his shock, he hastily circulated his energy trying to dissipate the attack.

At the same time, Du E took away the visiting card, and the whiff of internal energy transmitted through this card disappeared. Wei Yixiao's countenance changed, thinking that this one-eyed old monk's profound internal energy was truly immeasurable. He did not dare to linger any longer; leaning his body sideways, he skate on a layer of long grass on the ground, back to Zhang Wuji's side.

It was his infamous 'cao shang fei' [flying on the grass] 'qing gong'. Although it was not exceptionally good, but to train until he was able float like that, that could be considered brilliant. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others thought, "This man can achieve this level of 'qing gong', he undoubtedly has received training from a master, but obviously because he has talent. It seems that he was born with different trait that other people would not necessarily reach this kind of level even though they train painstakingly."

Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu said on your precious Cult there will be three people joining our exchange of pointers. Other than Jiaozhu and this gentleman Wei Fu Wang, who will the other person be?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "Wei Fu Wang had received instructions from Dashi's divine internal energy. I am thinking of inviting the Ming Cult's Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness to help me."

Du E was surprised, "This young man has a very sharp vision," he mused, "I sent the internal energy via the visiting card for only a split second, yet unexpectedly it did not elude his eyes. Now, what kind of people are these Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness? Could their martial art skills be better than this person surnamed Wei's?"

He had lived in seclusion for too long, hence he had never heard about Yang Xiao's reputation. As for Fan Yao, he had been living incognito for the last several years so not everybody knew about him.

As Yang and Fan two people heard Jiaozhu mentioning their names, they stepped forward at once and bowed down. "Respectfully accept Jiaozhu's command," they said.

"The Three Eminent Monks use flexible weapons, what will be a good weapon for us to use?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhang, Yang and Fan, three people usually fought their enemies barehanded. Today they were facing formidable opponents, so they could not hold on to their habit of not wielding any weapon. For these three people, they knew ten-thousand different techniques as well as one; for them, any weapons would do. Zhang Wuji asked this question just for the convenience of the other two.

"We'll follow Jiaozhu's instruction," Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji hesitated a moment; he thought, "Last night, the Twin Evils of Hejian were using short weapons to attack long ones; and they seemed to gain quite a few advantages from it." Thereupon he took the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling from his bosom and handed over four of them to Yang Xiao and Fan Yao, while saying, "This time, we are going up the mountain to pay a visit to the Shaolin Temple, we do not dare to bring any weapons. This is our own Cult's treasure; let us

just use these tablets then.”

Yang and Fan two people bowed down and received the tablets. They were asking for further instructions when suddenly Kong Zhi shouted, “Ku Toutuo, we still have an unfinished business from the Wan An Temple; how can I let you go? Come, come, come! Let Lao Na ask for your advice first. Lao Na did not take the ‘Shi Xiang Ruan Jin San’ today; we are going to see our true power.”

He had never forgotten the resentment of being held captive at the Wan An Temple; upon seeing Fan Yao today, he had tried his best to suppress his rage, but at this time he could not hold his patience any longer.

Fan Yao laughed dryly and said, “I [orig. zai4xia4] received Jiaozhu’s order to ask instructions from the Three Eminent Monks. If Dashi wants to avenge the enmity of the former days, you’ll have to wait until this matter is closed, then I will be able to accompany you.”

From the hand of a Shaolin disciple standing next to him, Kong Zhi took a sword and shouted, “You are overestimating your own ability. You want to fight my three Shishu; if you don’t die, you will be seriously injured and then I can’t extract my revenge on you.”

Fan Yao laughed, “If I die under your honorable Shishu’s hand, won’t that be the same?”

Kong Zhi laughed coldly, “Looks to me there is no other master in your Ming Cult. What can I say?”

How could the Ming Cult warriors not know that he was provoking them? But if they ignored his remarks, would not the Shaolin Pai look down on the Ming Cult? In terms of rank,

Yin Tianzheng was right after Fan Yao. Zhang Wuji thought that his grandfather was old, it was inconvenient for him to ask Grandfather to fight. Therefore, he was thinking of asking his uncle [orig, Jiujiu – maternal uncle] Yin Yewang to take his father's place.

Yin Tianzheng took a step forward and said, "Jiaozhu, subordinate Yin Tianzheng is ready to accept instructions."

"Waigong is advanced in years, let me ask Uncle ..." Zhang Wuji said.

Yian Tianzheng cut him off, "I am old, but not as old as these Three Eminent Monks. Shaolin Pai can have their senior warriors; can't our Ming Cult have our own veteran?"

Zhang Wuji was aware that his grandfather's martial art skill was very deep; not beneath Yang Xiao or Fan Yao's, and a lot higher than his uncle's. If he joined this battle, their chance of victory was several degrees better. "All right," he said, "Fan You Shi can conserve your strength to accept instructions from Kong Zhi Shen Seng later. I am asking Grandfather to help me."

"I follow the order!" Yin Tianzheng replied, and took the Sheng Huo Ling tablets from Fan Yao's hands.

In a clear voice Abbot Kong Wen said, "Martial Uncles, this gentleman is Yin Lao Yingxiong [old hero Yin], Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king]. He is the founder of Tian Ying Jiao [heavenly eagle cult] of the former days, and its prestige was comparable to the Six major Sects. He is an extraordinary warrior. This gentleman is Mr. Yang; his inner and outer power has reached perfection. He is the Ming Cult's first class character. Numerous masters of Kunlun and Emei Pai have been defeated under his hands."

With a dry laugh Du Jie said, "Fortunate meeting, fortunate meeting! Let's see how well Shaolin disciples compete against them." The three black ropes shook; they soared like three China-ink black dragons and formed three layers of loops around their opponents.

Last night, when Zhang Wuji battled these three monks, he could not even see his own fingers, so he had to rely on the aura of the black ropes to determine the direction of the incoming weapons. This time, it was the beginning of the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm]; the sun was shining brightly in the sky that he was able to see clearly every wrinkle on the faces of the three monks. Reversing the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands, he cupped his fists and bowed. "Please forgive my offense," he said, and immediately attacked sideways.

Yang Xiao flew toward his left. With a loud shout Yin Tianzheng raised the Sheng Huoling in his right hand to strike the black rope in Du Nan's hand. A dull clanking noise was heard as the rope and the tablet collided. These two weapons were so strange that the noise generated when they struck each other also sounded weird. Both men's hands were shaken, and both exclaimed inwardly, "Very fierce!" They both realized that they were facing a formidable opponent, which they seldom meet in their lifetimes.

Zhang Wuji thought, "The three monks' black ropes are connected together to form a loop. Their defense is very tight. Although the three of us join hands, we might not necessarily be able to make a breakthrough within three to five hundred stances. We'd better try to exhaust the three monks' energy, then slowly look for a flaw." Seeing the black rope coil over his way, he used the Sheng Huo Ling to take the brute force head on with brute force.

Fighting for the time needed to cook rice, Zhang Wuji, three people managed to press forward and reduce the loop diameter a 'zhang' or so. However, as the three monks' loop was getting smaller, their defensive power increased. Each step the three attackers took required several folds of effort from the previous ones. As the battle progressed, Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng were more astonished than ever.

At first, the battle was three against three, but after about an hour, Yang and Yin, two people gradually could not hold their ground. In the end, the two of them fought Du Nan; while Zhang Wuji had to deal with Du E and Du Jie, two monks, alone.

Yin Tianzheng always took the 'hard' and 'ferocious' approach. Yang Xiao, on the other hand, sometimes used 'soft', sometimes 'hard'; his fighting style kept changing. Among these six combatants, Yang Xiao's martial art was the most attractive to look at. The two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands circled around and danced in the air; sometimes it became a sword, suddenly it changed into a saber. Sometimes he thrust it forward like a short spear, next time it struck, coiled, slapped, and then changed into a judge's pen; poking, pressing down, jerking up, and then the one in his left hand changed into a dagger, while the one in his right changed into an awl [(?) Translator's note: I don't know what kind of weapon this is. The original was 'shui3 ci4' ?? - 'water thorn']. Suddenly the one in his right hand changed into a steel whip, while the one in his left a crowbar. Within these hundreds of changes, he struck the two tablets to each other, creating a 'ya ya' [This is the transliteration of the Chinese characters, don't ask me what kind of noise is this.] sound, disturbing the enemy's concentration. Before they even fought for four hundred stances, the tablets had changed into twenty-two different weapons; with each weapon

incorporating two sets of styles, so altogether he had used forty-four different sets of styles.

Kong Zhi had mastered eleven out of Shaolin Pai's seventy-two unique skills; while almost no martial art skills in the world eluded Fan Yao's knowledge, but at this moment watching Yang Xiao deftly launch his divine skills, both of them could not help but inwardly sigh with admiration.

Zhou Dian had never been in good terms with Yang Xiao. The two of them had fought each other several times. But this moment, the longer Zhou Dian watched, the more ashamed he was. "Turn out this son of a turtle Yang Xiao has always yielded to me," he mused, "I knew his martial art skill was somewhat higher than mine, and I thought each time we fought, he was just lucky that he won by one stance or half a style. Who would have thought that I, Zhou Dian, actually inferior by one big peg to this son of a turtle."

However, no matter how many changes Yang Xiao launched, Du Nan's black rope still parry the two people's attack without showing any slackness. Everybody started to see white mist rising on top of Yin Tianzheng's head. They knew he was using his entire internal energy. The white robe he wore slowly ballooned up, and it was soaked with his perspiration. Each step he took left a deep mark on the ground. In an hour, the area around the three pine trees was full of his footprints.

Suddenly, Yin Tianzheng moved the Sheng Huo Ling tablet in his right hand to his left. With this pair of tablets he pushed Du Nan's black rope down; while with 'pi kong zhang' [splitting air palm] his right hand hack down toward Du Nan. Du Nan raised his left hand up with five fingers forming a claw, like a hollow fist, also hacking toward the incoming palm.

“Ah!” Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the other Shaolin monks exclaimed together; their voices were full of amazement and admiration. Turned out the technique Du Nan used was one of the seventy-two special skills of Shaolin, which was called the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ [overflowing mountain palm; ‘xu mi shan’ also means ‘Sumeru Mountain’, which is the central ‘world mountain’ of the Buddhist universe – courtesy of Ren Wo Xing]. Needless to say, this special skill was very difficult to train. But even if someone did master the technique, each time it was launched, the practitioner must assumed the horse stance, and concentrated his ‘qi’ for a long time; only then would he be able to gather his internal energy in his ‘dantian’. Who would have expected that Du Nan had a perfect control and was able to launch the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ at will?

‘Slap!’ as his hand blocked Yin Tianzheng’s palm, the black rope in his hand shook and struck toward Yang Xiao. But because the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ consumed a lot of energy, the power behind the black rope was diminished by more than a half. Du Nan quickly covered up his weakness by rolling, fluttering, and coiling the black rope as if it was a spirit snake randomly quivering in the air. Yang Xiao’s pair of Sheng Huoling tablets was also making countless changes. The eyes of most of the spectators were watching the battle between these two people.

Yin Tianzheng focused all his strength on his palms, sending strike after strike toward Du Nan. Sometimes he took two steps forward, another time he took two steps back.

On the other front, Zhang Wuji was engaged in a fierce battle against two formidable opponents. These three people’s style looked ordinary and bland, because their true battle was internal. This kind of staking-it-all internal energy match was

actually a lot more dangerous than Yin Tianzheng's battle of strength and Yang Xiao's battle of style against Du Nan. As soon as one of the parties' internal energy was overcome by the opponent, if he did not die instantly, then suffering fire-deviation, losing his sanity or being crippled was a common occurrence. However, only the combatants knew their own situations. To the spectators, even though their martial art skill was higher, they would never be able to predict the outcome of the battle by observing the three combatants' outward appearance.

Slowly the sun rose from the east, then it was exactly on top of their heads, before gradually moving to the west. By this time, the battle situation was clear for Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, and the other masters. They saw the mist coming out from the top of Yin Tianzheng's head was getting thicker; on the other hand, the trunk, the branches and the needle-leaves of the big pine tree in which Du Jie was sitting were shaking constantly. From this fact, they knew the difference in level of power of the two monks, Du E and Du Jie. At this stage of the battle, Du Jie's back was leaning against the tree to borrow its strength in blocking Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Shen Gong. If Yin Tianzheng fell, the Ming Cult lost; but if Du Jie gave up first, then the Shaolin Pai was defeated.

The six combatants also understood they had reached the crucial point of the battle. Yin Tianzheng was staking it all in sending out his palm attacks toward Du Nan, but after more than thirty stances, he realized he was not Du Nan's match. "Our priority today is saving Xie Xiongdi," he said in his heart, "My own victory or defeat, glory or disgrace, why should I care? Much less I lost under the hand of Shaolin Pai's senior master's hand, so nobody can say that the Bai Mei Ying Wang's prestige is damaged."

Thereupon, with all his might he blocked the enemy's attack, while he was forced to retreat half a step back. Successively he blocked more than ten strikes, and was forced to fall back more than a 'zhang'. He did not know, however, that Du Nan had trained the 'xu mi shan zhang', one of the seventy-two Shaolin Pai's special techniques for dozens of years, so that the power of his palm was not a small matter. As Yin Tianzheng withdrew one step, Du Nan's palm strength also advanced one step. Surprisingly, the power did not diminish ever so slightly with the increasing distance.

Yang Xiao thought, "This Shaolin monk is formidable indeed. No matter how much change my Sheng Huo Ling make, in the end I still fail to make him budge. Yin Bai Mei [white-browed Yin] only attacks with his strength, I am afraid he won't survive a prolonged battle."

He combined the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets and struck them toward the black rope. It looked like he was going to fight force with force head-on in order to help Yin Tianzheng. As the Sheng Huo Ling just about to strike the black rope, Du Nan shook his wrist, and the black rope rose up toward Yang Xiao's face. Yang Xiao's mind was as quick as lightning; he threw the Sheng Huo Ling tablets toward Du Nan's chest, while his palms turned over to grab the end of the rope. It was the stance called 'dao ye jiu niu wei' [pulling back nine ox tails], in which a sudden force was pulling outward.

Du Nan saw Yang Xiao throw his weapons like secret projectiles with an extremely strong force; he raised his left hand with a bent elbow to press down the Sheng Huo Ling threatening his left chest. To his surprise, the other Sheng Huo Ling suddenly changed its course midair and 'whoosh!' it flew toward Du Jie.

Yang Xiao was the most resourceful among these six

combatants. His attack with these two Sheng Huo Ling tablets toward Du Nan was a fake; his real target was Du Jie, in which he sent out his entire internal strength.

Du Jie was using his entire strength to fight Zhang Wuji. He noticed that in dealing with Yang and Yin, two people, Du Nan seemed to gain an upper hand. He had never expected that Yang Xiao was able to launch this extraordinary sneak attack with such a weird technique. In his shock, he saw the Sheng Huo Ling was already in front of his face. Du Jie's concentration was slightly broken. He lightly stretched his hand with two fingers up to catch the Sheng Huo Ling. But his entire strength and attention was focused on blocking Zhang Wuji's attack; as he was disturbed, the pine tree he was sitting on shook violently, pine-needles fell down like rain.

As he saw a big break in his opponent's line of defense, Zhang Wuji launched the highest technique of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to penetrate this opening. It was unstoppable even when the enemy used a hundred different techniques to block; much less Du Jie was in a disadvantageous situation. Zhang Wuji sent his internal energy toward his five fingers. With a 'zip, zip' noise, his hand struck down. 'Crack, crack!' In an instant, the branches on Du Jie's tree were shaken and fell down one by one.

Du E realized their precarious situation. 'Whoosh!' He stood up suddenly. His shadow swayed and he flew toward Du Jie's side. Stretching his left hand, he grabbed Du Jie's shoulder. With the help of his martial brother Du E, Du Jie was able to steady himself.

On the other front, Du Nan's fight against Yin Tianzheng and Yang Xiao also reached a critical moment, where both sides were staking all they have in a life and death battle. Yang

Xiao was grabbing the rope and trying to pull it away. With a 'splitting mountain, crushing stone' kind of palm power, Yin Tianzheng kept pressing down the enemy. Two masters, one pulled, the other pushed. Du Nan was attacked with two exact opposite forces; even though he was extremely strained, he did not seem to be in danger of losing.

The spectators on the side, both the Ming Cult warriors and the Shaolin monks, also saw this critical situation. They knew that if the battle went on, not only the victory or defeat was difficult to decide, perhaps from among these six masters, more than half would be either dead or seriously injured. The hill peak was awfully quiet, with the backs of most of the spectators wet with sweats. They were all very tense; everybody was concerned about their own side.

The silence was suddenly broken by a low and deep voice, coming from the ground in the middle of the three pine trees, "Yang Zuo Shi, Yin Dage, Wuji Hai'er [left emissary Yang, big brother Yin, child Wuji], I, Xie Xun, have a pair of bloodstained hands. I deserved to be condemned. Today, in order to save me, you are battling the Shaolin Temple's three eminent monks. If either side is harmed, Xie Xun, cannot bear the additional guilt. Child Wuji, quickly take our Cult brethren out of the Shaolin Temple. If you don't, I am going to cut my own main artery to avoid adding my own sin."

Xie Xun spoke with his divine skill 'lion roar', with which, on the Wang Pan Island in the past, he had shaken the soul of countless warriors from various clans and sects ['bang' and 'pai']. This time, although he did not use it to harm anybody, he still managed to shake everybody's soul that their eardrums were buzzing, and they looked at each other with changed countenances.

Zhang Wuji knew his Yifu's words were as strong as a

mountain; and his Yifu was not willing for anybody to be injured to get himself out of this trouble. Zhang Wuji considered the present situation carefully; supposing both sides fought with all their strengths, although he himself might be all right, but it was possible that Grandfather, Yang Xiao, Du Jie and Du Nan, four people could not avoid injuries.

While he was hesitating, Xie Xun loudly shouted, "Wuji, you are not leaving yet?"

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji said, "I will follow Yifu's order." He took a step backward, and in a clear voice he said, "The Three Eminent Monks' martial art skill is really marvelous. Today the Ming Cult is not able to break it. We will return some other day to ask more advice. Grandfather, Yang Zuo Shi, we stop fighting!" As he said that, he gathered his 'qi' and flicked Du E and Du Jie's black ropes that the ropes returned to their master.

Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng heard his order, but they were still engaged in an internal energy battle with Du Nan, and were incapable of stopping the fight, because if they pulled back their strengths, Du Nan's force would injure them. For the same reason, Du Nan was also incapable of stopping the fight.

Zhang Wuji walked in front of Yin Tianzheng. Waving both of his palms, he took and neutralized the palm power of Du Nan and Yin Tianzheng from left and right. And then reaching out with a Sheng Huo Ling, he pressed down on the black rope near the end held by Du Nan's hand. This black rope was held at either end by Du Nan and Yang Xiao, it was stretched very tight just like a bowstring. As Zhang Wuji's Sheng Huo Ling pressed down, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi's divine power immediately dissolved the pulling forces. The black rope loosened and fell down to the ground.

Yang Xiao deftly reached down and caught the rope. Du Nan's countenance changed; he was just about to speak when Yang Xiao, holding the black rope with both hands, took several steps forward and said, "Respectfully presenting Dashi's weapon." Du Jie understood Yang Xiao's intention. He picked the Sheng Huo Ling tablets by his side and returned them to Yang Xiao.

After going through this battle, the three Shaolin eminent monks lost their previous haughtiness. They knew that if this staking-it-all battle continued, both sides would suffer losses, while the three of them would not necessarily achieve victory.

"Lao Na has lived in seclusion for decades," Du E said, "To be able to make acquaintance with worthy warriors of the present time, we feel very happy and fortunate. Zhang Jiaozhu, you have people with outstanding ability in your precious Cult. You yourself are even more excelling above the others. I hope you will use this excellent capability to benefit common people and do not use it for dishonorable businesses."

Zhang Wuji bowed and said, "Thank you very much for Dashi's advice. Our humble Cult does not dare to commit evil acts."

Du E continued, "We, three martial brothers, will respectfully await here for Zhang Jiaozhu's third visit."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji replied, "However, I will have to ask for some more advice. Xie Fa Wang is my Yifu. His kindness is more than a family to me."

Du E heaved a deep sigh, closed his eyes, and did not say anything anymore.

Leading Yang Xiao and the others, Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and took his leave from Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the other Shaolin monks; then they went down the mountain. Peng Yingyu sent out a signal, instructing the Five-element Flags to withdraw. Five 'li's outside the Temple, the Cult disciples from Jumu [gigantic tree/wood] and Houtu [thick earth] Flags built more than a dozen wooden shacks on a hillside for their leaders lodgings.

Zhang Wuji was despressed, as he thought that within their Cult, nobody possessed martial art skills higher than Yang Xiao and his grandfather. Even if he took Fan Yao and Wei Yixiao, he doubt if the result would be different than today's battle. Where in the world can I find one or two masters who are superior to them, who can help me break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'?

Peng Yingyu guessed correctly what was in his mind. "Jiaozhu," he said, "Have you forgotten about Zhang Zhenren?"

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, "Supposing my Tai Shifu is willing to go down the mountain and help us, the two of us join hands, we would certainly break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'. However, by doing this, Tai Shifu would damage the friendship between the Shaolin Pai and Wudang Pai; so Tai Shifu might not want to do it. Besides, Tai Shifu is over a hundred years old. Although his martial art skill has reached a high degree of proficiency, his physique is, after all, declining. If there is any accident, wouldn't that be very bad?"

Yin Tianzheng suddenly rose on his feet, with a laughter he said, "If Zhang Zhenren is willing to go down the mountain, our success is guaranteed. Marvelous! Marvelous!" After

several hollow laughs, the laughing voice suddenly stopped, but his mouth was still wide open.

Seeing he froze in standing position with a laughing face, the group of warriors felt strange. "Yin Xiong," Yang Xiao said, "Do you think Zhang Zhenren will go down the mountain to help us?"

He asked twice, but Yin Tianzheng did not reply, he did not even move. Zhang Wuji was startled, he reached out to feel his pulse, and found that Yin Tianzheng's pulse had already stopped; he had unexpectedly passed away.

Turned out when Yin Tianzheng was the only one left to fight the warriors of the Six Major Sects on the Brightness Peak, he had strained himself, and his physique had suffered a great damage. His recent 'staking-it-all' battle with Du Nan had further depleted his strength, plus he was also quite advanced in years, so his condition was like a dried up oil lamp.

Crying, Zhang Wuji embraced his body. Yin Yewang rushed forward and cried his heart out. The group of warriors also remembered their comradeship and spirit of loyalty and brotherhood ['yi qi']; there wasn't anybody who did not shed tears. The news travelled fast; there were a lot of Heavenly Eagle Cult disciples who now served under the Ming Cult banner, their sound of crying shook the hill and valley.

For the next several days the group of warriors was busy attending to Yin Tianzheng's funeral. Wulin leaders and masters from various sects and clans and societies also went up the mountain. These people admired Yin Tianzheng's prestige, and came in front of his coffin in the wooden shack to offer their condolences.

Later on, Shaolin Pai also sent thirty-six monks to offer prayers for Yin Tianzheng's departing soul. But they had only read several verses from the scripture when Yin Yewang, with a 'ku sang' staff [from MDBG dictionary: a mourning staff draped in white, held at a funeral to show filial piety] in his hand, exploded in anger and chased these thirty-six monks out.

From the side, Zhou Dian shouted his curse, "Hypocritical Shaolin bald donkeys!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was still burdened with their rescue effort; several times he consulted Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu, Zhao Min, and the others, but nobody was able to offer a good solution. Zhao Min wanted to try the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' in Du E's, three monks, diet. She also wanted to summon Lu Zhangke and He Biweng to collaborate with Zhang Wuji. But on both accounts Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao and the others thought it was inappropriate.

End of Chapter 36.

Chapter 37 - No Hero Under the Heavens Able to Withstand

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



A hundred Hong Shui Flag men pumped their spray guns and a hundred streams of water were shot out. The crowd of heroes smelled a peal of acid stench , as the twenty hungry wolves were hit by the water, they tumbled down at once, yelping madly and howling miserably. In an instant, their skin split open and their flesh rot, they turned into coal-black piles.

Very soon it was the Duan Yang Festival. Zhang Wuji led the Ming Cult warriors to Shaolin Temple. The Shaolin Temple's front hall, rear hall, left and right side rooms, everywhere was overflowing with heroes and warriors from all kinds of martial art schools. Among these Wulin characters, some had enmity toward Xie Xun, so they anxiously came to kill him to avenge their grievance. Some others were there for the Tulong Saber, so they were dreaming of snatching the precious saber away and becoming the 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wulin zhi zun]. Yet some others were having a grudge against each other, so they came to seize the opportunity to avenge their grievances. But the majority came just because they loved the festivities bustling with noise and excitement.

The Shaolin Temple prepared more than a hundred monks as ushers; they directed the guests to their respective places. Wudang Pai had sent Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting as their representatives. Zhang Wuji quickly stepped forward to welcome them and inquired about Zhang Sanfeng's well-being.

Yu Lianzhou quietly said, "Did you hear anything about Qingshu and Chen Youliang?"

Zhang Wuji briefly told him what happened since they parted, and was relieved to learn Song and Chen, two men, had not stirred up any trouble on Mount Wudang, and that at

this moment, Song Yuanqiao and Zhang Songxi did not come because they were guarding their Shifu and their monastery against the traitors' evil plot. Yu Lianzhou also mentioned that ever since Song Yuanqiao heard with his own ears how his own only son was plotting against him, he was heart-broken and did not have any appetite for food and drink. Right now, he was half as thin as he was. They did not dare to tell their Shifu anything, for fear that Shifu would be grieved.

Zhang Wuji said, "I do hope Song Shige [martial (older) brother] realizes his wrong path very soon and repents, so that he can be reunited with Song Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle]."

"That is so," Yu Lianzhou said, "But this renegade has killed Mo Qidi [seventh (younger) brother], we cannot let him off lightly." His voice was full of bitter hatred.

Within the next two hours, more and more Wulin characters arrived. The Twin Evil of Hejian and the Qinghai Pai swordsmen who fought the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan the other day had also arrived. Huashan Pai, Kongtong Pai and Kunlun Pai also sent out their masters to attend the meeting. Only nobody from Emei Pai went up the mountain.

Zhang Wuji was hoping he would see Zhou Zhiruo; he wanted to explain to her why he did what he did the other day. However, as he imagined her face and her gaze, he became anxious from a mixture of fear and shame.

The Ming Cult warriors were assigned the west side room. They did not mingle with the other heroes, because they simply had too many enemies. They were afraid that as personal enemies meet, a big fight would ensue even before the Great Assembly was officially opened.

As the seventh hour [between 11am - 1 pm] arrived, the usher monks invited the guests to gather on a large open space to the right of the Temple. It was actually a several hundred 'mu' [1 mu is approximately one fifteenth of a hectare] vegetable garden on which the monks grew their food. But this time the field was leveled, and several dozens wooden shelters were erected on it.

The warriors sat on their assigned seats as directed by the monks. Any school, sect, clan or society with a large group of warriors occupied one shelter; while those with fewer numbers of delegates shared the shelter with other warriors. Peng Yingyu reported the name and origin of each and every warrior on the field for Zhang Wuji's benefit.

When all the warriors had gathered, it was obvious that this meeting would be a grand occasion. Many characters who normally did not roam the Jianghu too often, who had lived in the privacy of the remote mountains and forests, also made their appearance one after another. Peng Yingyu estimated that not including the Ming Cult, there were about 4,600 people on the field that day. Seeing these numerous assembly participants, most of them were not friendly toward the Ming Cult, Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, and the others were anxious.

After the audience had been seated, the Shaolin monks began to appear. Beginning with the Yuan generation, followed by Hui, Fa, Xiang, and Zhuang, they bowed toward the audience. Finally Kong Zhi Shen Seng appeared, followed by nine senior monks from the Damo Hall. Kong Zhi walked toward the middle of the field, clasped his palms in respect, uttered some praises to Buddha, and then said, "The arrival of the world's heroes in acceptance to our invitation today has brought great honor to Shaolin Pai. However, Fangzhang Shixiong is suddenly ill that he does not have the good fortune of seeing the virtuous guests. He therefore, asked Lao

Na to convey his deepest regret.”

Zhang Wuji felt little bit strange, “When Kong Wen Dashi attended Grandfather’s funeral the other day, he did not look sick at all; he looked spirited and bright. With the kind of internal energy he has, how can he fall sick so suddenly? Could he be injured?” He looked around but saw neither Yuan Zhen nor Chen Youliang; he thought, “That night I exposed Yuan Zhen’s treachery to Du E, three eminent monks; I wonder if Shaolin has taken care of him or not. I wonder if Kong Wen Dashi’s sudden illness has anything to do with it.”

At the end of the Southern Song Dynasty, after Guo Jing and Huang Rong, husband and wife, had scored several major victories, they invited the world’s heroes and warriors to Xiangyang to discuss plans and strategies to withstand the Mongolian invasion. And now, almost a hundred years later, another great assembly of world’s heroes and warriors, the biggest grand occasion in the Jianghu, was being held; but all of a sudden the host was ill. It is no wonder the crowd of warriors could not help but feel disappointed.

They heard Kong Zhi continue, “Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun has wreaked havoc in the Wulin; he has committed a very serious crime. Luckily, our humble Temple has captured him. Shaolin Pai does not dare to make the decision on our own. Therefore, we respectfully invite all honorable Wulin warriors to discuss how we are going to handle this matter.”

His face was long ever since he made his appearance; by now, he sounded lethargic. As soon as he finished speaking, he clasped his palms again and withdrew.

A man stood up on the southeast corner, his stature was big and tall, the black beard on his face was interspersed with white, and it was fluttering in the breeze, he swept his gaze

on the warriors with a bright and fiery pair of eyes; in short, he looked imposing. Peng Yingyu quietly informed Zhang Wuji that this person was Shandong's old pugilist master, Xia Zhou. They heard his thunderous voice say, "This Xie Xun has done too much evil. Your precious Sect unexpectedly able to capture him, the benefit you bring to the Wulin world is not small. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, two Shen Seng [divine monks] are too modest. This kind of evil person deserves to be executed immediately with a blade. End of story. Why do you have to ask others? Today, the heroes from all over the world are gathered here, and we call this assembly 'tu shi da hui' [lion-slaying great assembly]. Let us put this Xie Xun to death, and then everybody eat his flesh and drink his blood, as a revenge for our innocent friends and relatives who died under his hands. Won't we all be happy?"

His own older brother was killed by Xie Xun, so for the last dozens of years he always wanted revenge. As his words, several hundred people around the field echoed his sentiment; they all wanted to kill Xie Xun as soon as possible.

Amidst the commotion, suddenly a sad sounding voice was heard. "Xie Xun is the Ming Cult's 'hu jiao fa wang' [see my note in Chapter 30 earlier]. If Shaolin Pai were not afraid to offend the Ming Cult, they would already have put Xie Xun to the sword early on; why would they invite everybody here to share the blame? I think, Xia Dage [big brother Xia], you are a bit muddle-headed. Let your brother here tell you something: you'd better watch out for your own life."

His voice might be sad and high-pitched, sounded like a man, but also like a woman, but as it reached everybody's ears, the words were very clear. Everybody turned their heads toward the voice, but they could not see who it was. Apparently, that speaker was short, and when he talked, he did not stand up. Sitting among the crowd, nobody could see

him.

Xia Zhou loudly said, "Is that 'zui bu si' [drunken but not dead] Brother Situ? I have an enmity with that Xie Xun for killing my brother. A real man is not afraid of his own actions. I can ask the Shaolin eminent monks to take him out; I will kill him personally. If the devil heads of the Devil Cult want revenge, they can come to look for the man surnamed Xia of Shandong."

The man with the sad voice laughed and said, "Xia Dage, everybody in Jianghu knows that the 'most revered in the Wulin world', the precious Tulong Saber, has fallen into Xie Xun's hand. Since Shaolin Pai has acquired Xie Xun, how can they not be interested in the treasured Saber? Killing Xie Xun is secondary; lifting up the Saber to show their prestige is the priority. I'll say: Kong Zhi Dashi, you don't need to put an act; just take that precious Tulong Saber and hold it high in your hands, let us broaden our horizons. For thousand of years, you, Shaolin Pai, have been the head and brain of the Wulin world. With the Saber you won't achieve much, without the Saber you won't lose much; you will always be the 'most revered in the Wulin world'."

In a low voice Peng Yingyu said to Zhang Wuji, "The speaker is 'Zui Bu Si', Situ Qianzhong. This person is carefree; I heard he doesn't have any master, does not take any disciple, does not belong to any school or society, and very seldom engage in battle. Nobody knows the detail of his martial art skill. His tone is always cold and condescending, but oftentimes right on target."

They heard about seven, eight people in the audience say, "His words make sense. Would Shaolin Pai please take the Tulong Saber out for everybody to see?"

“The Tulong Saber is not in our humble Temple,” Kong Zhi slowly said, “In all my life, Lao Na has never seen it. I am not even sure if such saber indeed exists in the world.”

As soon as the crowd of heroes heard this, they broke into murmurs; the field was suddenly bustling with noise. The attendees were originally thinking that other than about Tulong Saber, this assembly did not have anything else of great importance. Who would have thought that Kong Zhi would flatly deny the possession of the Saber? Everybody felt strange.

The nine old monks standing behind Kong Zhi were all wearing red kasayas. After the commotion in the audience subsided, one of the nine monks took two steps forward and with a loud voice said, “The Tulong Saber was originally in Xie Xuns hands; however, when our humble Sect captured him, the Saber was no longer in his possession. Our temple’s Fangzhang realizes that this is an important matter of the Wulin world; therefore, he immediately launched an investigation. Xie Xun is stubborn and arrogant; he is unwilling to tell us the truth. Today’s great assembly of heroes, first of all, is to discuss how we are going to handle Xie Xun. Secondly, we want to inquire if any of the heroes has heard anything about the Tulong Saber’s whereabouts. Whoever has any information is invited to speak up.”

The crowd of heroes looked at each other; nobody opened his mouth. Again, the ‘Zui Bu Si’ Situ Qianzhong, with his sad and high-pitched voice said, “For the last hundred of years, there is a saying in the martial art world, ‘the most revered in the Wulin world, precious Saber slaughtering the dragon (Tu Long), ruling under the heavens, nobody dares to disobey. Yitian (relying on Heaven) does not appear, who can match its sharpness?’ Other than the Tulong Saber, there is the Yitian Sword. I heard this Yitian Sword was originally in the

hands of Emei Pai, but after the battle of the western region's Brightness Peak, nobody knew its whereabouts. Just because today's meeting is called the Heroes' Assembly, could it be that the Emei Pai's heroines refuse to come?" As the people heard his last sentence they broke into boisterous laughter.

[Translator's note: 'ying xiong' - hero, where the 'xiong' character can also mean 'male' (mostly used to refer to male animal), so literally, 'ying xiong' means 'brave male'. Situ Qianzhong used the characters 'ying ci' - 'brave female (animal)'. By calling the Emei Pai heroines as 'ying ci', he was not being complimentary (He would have used 'nu-xia' if he wanted to be courteous).]

Amidst the loud laughter, a monk in charge of guest reception made an announcement in loud voice, "The Beggar Clan's Shi Bangzhu, has arrived accompanied by various Zhanglao and various disciples."

As he heard the word 'Shi Bangzhu' three characters, Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised. "The Beggar Clan's Shi Huolong had died long ago under Yuan Zhen's hands," he thought, "How come there is another Shi Bangzhu?"

"Please!" Kong Zhi responded. The Beggar Clan was the biggest clan in Jianghu, so it was only proper for him to welcome them personally.

They saw a large group of people walk towards the open field in quick pace. There were approximately 150 men, all in rags and tattered clothes. The Beggar Clan's prestige has been in decline in the last several years, but just like a centipede that moves even after it dies, it had not become placid; the Beggar Clan still has an enormous power in the Jianghu. The crowd of heroes did not dare to despise them; most of them stood up to show their respect.

The ones in the front were two elderly beggars. Zhang Wuji recognized them as Chuan Gong Zhanglao and Zhi Fa Zhanglao. Behind these two old beggars was an ugly girl of twelve, thirteen years; her nose curved upward, her mouth was wide, revealing two big front teeth. She was none other than Shi Huolong's daughter, Shi Hongshi. In her hand was the Beggar Clan's symbol of authority, the Dog Beating Stick. Behind Shi Hongshi walked Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou, followed by eight-pouch elders, seven-pouch disciples, and six-pouch disciples. It looked like the lowest ranking disciples within the Beggar Clan contingent this time were the six-pouch disciples.

As Kong Zhi saw the one holding the Dog Beating Stick was a little girl, he hesitated; he was not sure which one was the Clan Leader and thus was not sure to whom he should speak, but he was obliged to respond. Therefore, clasping his palms, he said without addressing anybody in particular, "The monks of Shaolin respectfully welcome the warriors of the Beggar Clan."

Together, the Beggar Clan warriors cupped their fists to return the propriety. Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "Our humble Clan's former Shi Bangzhu was unfortunate and has return to Heaven. The elders have voted to elect Shi Bangzhu's daughter, Miss Shi Hongshi to be Bangzhu. This lady is therefore our Clan's new Bangzhu." He pointed toward Shi Hongshi.

Kong Zhi and the crowd of warriors were taken aback. They remembered the saying in the Jianghu, 'Ming Jiao, Gai Bang, Shaolin Pai'. Within the 'jiao' [cults, religions], Ming Cult was the leader; within the world's 'bang hui' [clans and societies], the Beggar Clan held the place of honor; within the 'men pai' [martial art schools and sects], Shaolin Pai was the number

one. The Ming Cult had elected a twenty-year-old young man, Zhang Wuji as their Jiaozhu; already people were clucking their tongues in amazement. And now the Beggar Clan pushed this little girl to be their Bangzhu? If it did not come from a Zhanglao's [elder] mouth, nobody would believe it. In the past, Huang Rong was also a young girl when she took over the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu position. Although it was a good precedent, at that time Huang Rong was several years older compared to this little girl.

Kong Zhi did not lack any courtesy in his surprise. He clasped his palms and said, "Shaolin disciple Kong Zhi pays his respect to Shi Bangzhu."

Shi Hongshi bowed down to return the propriety; she seemed to mumble something, but nothing came out of her mouth. Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "Our humble Clan's Bangzhu is young. All businesses of the Clan are temporarily being handled by Xiongdi [brother, referring to self] and Zhi Fa Zhanglao, two people. Kong Zhi Shen Seng is more senior by far so you do not need to be overly courteous."

After the two of them exchanged some modest pleasantries, the usher monk directed the Beggar Clan warriors to take their seats in one of the wooden shelters.

The Beggar Clan contingent was big, so it took half a day for all of them to be seated. Zhang Wuji noticed that the group of beggars was wearing mourning clothes; their faces carried grief and an indignation expression. The pouches on some of the disciples had things inside that were seemingly wriggling and moving. It was obvious that they came with some purpose in mind. Zhang Wuji smirked inwardly; he whispered to Yang Xiao, "We have some helpers."

He saw Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa, two elders were escorting

Shi Hongshi walk toward the Ming Cult's shelter. Chuan Gong Zhanglao cupped his fists in salute and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, our humble Clan shares a large part of responsibility in Jin Mao Shi Wang falling into the enemy. Even if we have to lose our lives today, we must redeem our offense. Furthermore, we want to avenge our Shi Bangzhu's death. The Beggar Clan, from top to bottom, is under Zhang Jiaozhu's command."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was speaking with his strong internal power that his words were loud and clear; obviously, he deliberately wanted everybody in that open field to hear. As he finished speaking, the numerous Beggar Clan disciples stood up together and said in loud voices, "Respectfully waiting for the Ming Cult Zhang Jiaozhu's command; we will not refuse to go through the water or tread on the fire."

The warriors were baffled, "Since when the Beggar Clan formed a life and death alliance with the Ming Cult?"

Other than very few people who seldom roamed the Jianghu, everybody knew that for the past many years, the Beggar Clan and the Ming Cult were always at each other's throat. A few years ago, the Beggar Clan participated in the siege of the Brightness Peak. The casualties from both sides were very heavy in that one bloody battle alone. On their last attack against the Brightness Peak, almost all Beggar Clan warriors were annihilated. And now, Chuan Gong Zhanglao had openly declared that the entire Beggar Clan force was under Zhang Wuji's command, and that they wanted to avenge their former Shi Bangzhu, everyone scratched their heads in confusion.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao turned around and said in a loud

voice, "Our Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai never had neither enmity nor grudge. Our humble Clan has always regarded Shaolin Pai as the Wulin's number one major sect. In case of any small misunderstanding, we have always exercised self-restraint as much as we possibly can, and have never dared to offend Shaolin Pai openly. As our humble Clan's Shi Qian Bangzhu's [former Shi Bangzhu] subordinates, we have always admired the Four Divine Monks of Shaolin as persons of virtue and prestige; as the model warriors of the martial art study we should imitate. Shi Qian Bangzhu had long ago lived in seclusion to recuperate from his injury in peace and quiet; for dozens of years he had not made any contacts with other Jianghu characters. But somehow, he had fallen under a Shaolin senior monk's evil hands ..."

"Ah!" as he spoke to this point, the people around the field called out in shock. Even Kong Zhi was taken by surprise.

In the meantime, Chuan Gong Zhanglao continued, "We come here today to ask, in the presence of the heroes of the world, Kong Wen Fangzhang to give us directions in treading this confusing path. What did our Shi Qian Bangzhu do to offend Shaolin that that Shaolin senior monk, even after he killed Shi Qian Bangzhu, had to be so merciless toward his widow, a lone helpless woman that in the end Mrs. Shi was not able to defend her own life?"

"Amitufo," Kong Zhi clasped his palms, "Only at this moment Lao Na learned of Shi Bangzhu's misfortune and that he passed away. Zhanglao keeps proclaiming that it was our humble Sect's disciple who has done it; I am afraid there is a big misunderstanding in this case. Would Zhanglao please tell us the details?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "For thousands of years Shaolin Pai has been the 'tai shan bei dou' [Mount Tai (Taishan) Big

Dipper Constellation, 'as weighty as Mt. Tai, as brilliant as the Big Dipper', meaning the ultimate] of the Wulin world; how can we dare to make a false accusation? Your precious Temple has an eminent monk and a secular disciple; we request that they come out and confront us."

"Zhanglao please tell us what to do, we will comply," Kong Zhi replied, "I wonder which two people Zhanglao wants to come out?"

"They are ..." Chuan Gong Zhanglao only uttered the 'are' word, and suddenly he was tongue-tied with his mouth open, unable to continue.

Kong Zhi was shocked. He hastily stepped forward and grabbed his right wrist, feeling for pulse, which, unexpectedly, had stopped. Kong Zhi was even more shocked. "Zhanglao! Zhanglao!" he called. Looking at Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face, Kong Zhi saw a small black dot the size of the head of an incense stick between his eyebrows; apparently his fatal point was hit by some poisonous secret projectile.

With a loud voice Kong Zhi shouted, "Fellow Heroes and Warriors, please understand. This Beggar Clan elder was hit by a poisonous secret projectile and unfortunately lost his life. Our Shaolin Pai has never used this kind of evil secret projectile."

The Beggar Clan people immediately broke into clamor; several dozen people rushed toward Chuan Gong Zhanglao's body. Zhang Bo Longtou took a piece of magnet from his pocket and put it in between Chuan Gong Zhanglao's eyebrows. He pulled a steel needle, as fine as an ox hair, only about an inch long. The Beggar Clan elders realized that Kong Zhi was not lying; an upright and prestigious sect like

Shaolin Pai certainly would not use this kind of evil secret projectile. However, someone had sneakily and unexpectedly launched a secret projectile, under broad daylight, under the gaze of thousands of eyes without anybody seeing it, and this was certainly strange beyond anybody's imagination.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others thought that Chuan Gong Zhanglao was standing with his face to the south, so the secret projectile must come from the south. At this time, the sun was shining dazzlingly, Chuan Gong Zhanglao was indignant and excited so he must have been unguarded against this kind of fine secret projectile. With angry glare the elders looked at the people behind Kong Zhi. They saw that the eyes of the nine old monks wearing red kasaya were half-closed with their eyebrows drooping down. Behind these nine monks stood a row of monks wearing yellow robes, followed by monks in gray robes. However, although they had no doubt that the murderer was one of these Shaolin monks, they could not tell which one was the villain.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao let out a loud and long laugh, while tears rolling down like rain from his eyes. "Kong Zhi Dashi," he said, "Are you still thinking that we have brought false accusation towards Shaolin Pai? How will you explain what has just happened?"

Zhang Bang Longtou was the most hot-tempered among the beggars; brandishing the iron staff in his hand, he roared, "We will fight to the death with Shaolin Pai today!"

'Clang, clang, clang!' a chaotic noise was heard as the Beggar Clan people took out their weapons and charged toward the middle of the field.

With a grieved countenance Kong Zhi turned around toward the group of Shaolin monks. "Ever since our ancestor Damo arrived from the west, for thousands of years our Temple has

established a strong foundation in diligent cultivation of the teachings of Buddha and the most refined in maintaining monastic discipline. Although we train martial arts for self-defense and have been interacting with the brave warriors of the Jianghu, we have never dared to perform dishonorable deeds. Fangzhang Shixiong [martial brother Abbot] and I have long ago given up the worldly matters. How can we still feel any attachment to this red dust ...” His gaze swept the faces of the monks. “This poisonous needle,” he continued, “Who shot it out? A real man who dares to do it, must also have the courage to accept responsibility. Stand up and face me.”

None of the several hundred monks opened his mouth; some of them muttered, “Amitufo, sin, sin!”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was stirred, he recalled his parents’ story how his mother Yin Susu had posed as his father, Zhang Cuishan, and used poisonous needles to kill Shaolin monks, and thus had caused his father to bear the grudge despite his innocence. But the silver needles of Tian Ying Jiao [Heavenly Eagle Cult] differed greatly from this steel needle, both in shape and in toxicity. The poison of the one taken from Chuan Gong Zhanglao’s dead body looked like that of the western region’s venomous insect ‘xin yi tiao’ [one heart beat]. It was called the ‘xin yi tiao’ because as the poison from the insect contacted the warm blood, the heart would beat only once, and then it would stop beating altogether.

Zhang Wuji knew that Shi Huolong was killed by Yuan Zhen; he also knew that hidden among the Shaolin monks were Yuan Zhen’s henchmen. Consequently, the reason Chuan Gong Zhanglao was shot with the needle must be to close his mouth from mentioning Yuan Zhen’s name. Only at that time everybody was looking at Chuan Gong Zhanglao, so nobody paid any attention on who shot the needle.

Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, "Tens of thousands Beggar Clan disciples all know who Shi Bangzhu's killer is. You want to kill others to close their mouths? Humph, humph! Only if you kill all Beggar Clan disciples under the heavens! The murderer is a Buddhist monk, his name is Yuan Zhen ..."

Zhang Bo Longtou suddenly leaped in front of his comrade; his iron bowl moved. 'Ding!' he caught a steel needle with the bowl. It was still unclear from which direction the steel needle was shot, but Zhang Bo Longtou had put all his concentration guarding from the side. As soon as he saw a bluish streak of light flickered under the sun, he lifted his iron bowl to catch it. If he was half a step late, Zhang Bang Longtou would certainly meet his violent death.

Kong Zhi's shadow circled around to the back of the nine Damo Hall monks. 'Bang!' He kicked the fourth old monk down, followed by a grab on that monk's collar. "Kong Ru," he said while lifting that monk up, "It turns out that it is you! You are also ganging up with Yuan Zhen?" His right hand pulled down the front lapel of Kong Ru's Buddhist robe. 'Rip!' the robe tore, revealing a small steel tube, with a small hole on the head of the tube, on his waist.

Suddenly it became clear to everybody: there must be a powerful spring inside this steel tube. That monk only needed to reach into his pocket, press the trigger and the poisonous needle would shoot out of the hole. He did not need to raise his hand or wave his arm to do this; therefore, even if one was facing him only a few feet apart, one would not necessarily be able to see him shooting the secret projectile.

In his grief and anger, Zhang Bang Longtou raised his iron staff and swept it down, crushing Kong Ru's brain out. Kong

Ru was a peer of the Four Divine Monks; his martial art skill was on par with them, but he was seized by Kong Zhi and the acupoint on his back was sealed, so he could not move. As Zhang Bang Longtou's iron staff swept down, he was unable to evade. The crowd of warriors cried out in alarm together.

Kong Zhi was taken by surprise; he glowered at Zhang Bang Longtou, thinking, "You are too hot-headed; you did not even investigate clearly."

Amidst this confusion, suddenly from outside the field four Buddhist nuns wearing black robes walked in quick steps, each one had a whisk in her hand. In loud and clear voices they announced, "Emei Pai Zhangmen [sect leader] Zhou Zhiruo, leading the Emei disciples, pays her respect to Shaolin Temple's Kong Wen Fangzhang."

Kong Zhi laid down Kong Ru's body and replied, "Please come in." He welcomed the guests in a calm and composed manner. The remaining eight old monks of the Damo Hall followed behind him. It was as if they completely ignored the recent tragedy and it did not weigh on their mind at all.

After the four nuns paid their respects, they withdrew, turned around and left as swiftly as they came. The extraordinary thing about them was that these four women came and went as if they were one person; their footwork was light and graceful, as if they were floating leisurely, like passing clouds or flowing river, surging waves devoid of discreet steps.

As Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Zhiruo was coming, his face immediately turned red, and he stole a glance toward Zhao Min. At that exact same time, Zhao Min was also looking at him. Two people's gaze met. Zhao Min winked, it was as if she was smiling, but actually she was not. The corner of her mouth slanted down, as if in contempt; although it was not

clear whether she was mocking Zhang Wuji, who was at a loss, or she was looking at Emei Pai' bluff with disdain.

Unlike the Beggar Clan warriors who walked into the field on their own, the Emei Pai heroines waited for Kong Zhi and the Shaolin monks to go out and welcome them, and only then did they enter the field in neat formation. There were about eighty, ninety female disciples wearing black robes; most of them were bald Buddhist nuns of all ages, elderly, middle-aged and young, even teenaged nuns. Behind these female disciples, more than a 'zhang' away, walked a very beautiful young woman wearing dark green ordinary [Translator's note: by 'ordinary' here, I mean secular, not a Buddhist nun clothes] clothes in slow steps. She was the Emei Pai Sect Leader, Zhou Zhiruo. As Zhang Wuji saw her slim figure, with a rather thin and pallid face, he felt sorry for her, but also ashamed of himself.

Several 'zhang's behind Zhou Zhiruo, there were about twenty male disciples; they also wore black robes. Most of them had refined scholar-like features, unlike the masculine and imposing features common to those of Wulin characters. Each man's hands carried a wooden case of varying sizes, long and short. These hundred or so Emei disciples did not carry any weapon either on their bodies or their hands, obviously, the weapons were inside those boxes.

The crowd of warriors secretly praised, "The Emei Pai truly knows propriety; by not carrying weapons openly, they are showing deep respect toward the Shaolin Pai."

Zhang Wuji waited until they were seated before he walk toward Emei Pai's shelter and greet Zhou Zhiruo by cupping his fists. In bashful and ashamed voice he said, "Zhou Jiejie [elder sister Zhou], Zhang Wuji comes to apologize humbly."

More than ten Emei Pai female disciples stood up suddenly; their eyebrows were raised, their faces looked angry.

"I do not dare," Zhou Zhiruo returned the propriety. "Zhang Jiaozhu, why must you overly courteous? I am sure you are well since we part?" She looked completely calm, without any sign of either delight or anger.

Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping erratically. "Zhiruo," he said, "Because I was eager to save Yifu, I was being rude to you. I feel endless regret in my heart."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "I heard Xie Laoye [old master Xie] has fallen into Shaolin Temple's hands. Zhang Jiaozhu is an unrivalled hero, I am sure you have already rescued him."

Zhang Wuji blushed and said, "Shaolin Pai's eminent monks possess profound martial art skill. The Ming Cult has lost a battle. My (maternal) Grandfather was unfortunate and has passed away."

"Yin Laoye Zi [old master] was a hero of this age," Zhou Zhiruo said, "What a pity, what a pity!"

She did not show any emotion whether happy or angry. Zhang Wuji could not read her true feelings; he only felt that his words seem like bumping on her flexible nail, always bounce back without generating any interest on her part. However, thinking that compared to how bad he had hurt her by leaving her for Zhao Min in front of multitude of guests, the cold reception he received today was a thousand times, ten thousand times better. Thereupon he said, "Later, when we try to save Yifu, I wish you would lend your hands for old times' sake."

His heart stirred as soon as he said those words. "In the past

half a year, her skill has advanced greatly,” he mused, “At the wedding hall the other day, Fan You Shi was forced to retreat by her in just one stance even with the kind of skill he has. Min Mei has learned the special skills of various sects’ leaders, yet she was almost killed instantly by her; not to mention Du Baidang and Yi Sanniang, husband and wife just a few days ago. Perhaps ... perhaps as she took over the Emei Zhangmen [sect leader] position, she trained some secret martial art from some secret manual reserved exclusively for Sect Leader. Her comprehension is better than Mijue Shitai to the extent of although green was born of blue, it surpasses the blue [Translator’s note: a Chinese saying, means ‘student (or children) become superior to the master (or parents)']. If she is willing to collaborate with me, we might be able to break the ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan’.”

Thinking to this point, he was excited and said, “Zhiruo, I want to ask you a favor.”

Zhou Zhiruo’s countenance suddenly stiffened. “Zhang Jiaozhu,” she said, “Please exercise self-control. At this point, how can you address me like in the former days?” Beckoning to someone behind her she said, “Qingshu, come over here. Tell Zhang Jiaozhu about us.”

Zhang Wuji saw a man with face full of spiky beard step forward, cupping his fists and say, “Zhang Jiaozhu, how are you?”

Zhang Wuji recognized the voice as belonging to Song Qingshu; he took a closer look and recognized him as Song Qingshu; only he disguised himself as an older and uglier man to hide his original features. Thus Zhang Wuji also cupped his fists and said, “Turns out it is Song Shige [martial (older) brother]; I am well, thank you.”

Song Qingshu showed a faint smile and said, “Actually, I

should thank Zhang Jiaozhu. That day when you were about to marry my wife you had a second thought and regret ...”

“What?!?” Zhang Wuji was shocked; his voice trembled.

“I have Zhang Jiaozhu to thank for my happy and blissful marriage,” Song Qingshu said.

It was as if five thunderbolts had struck Zhang Wuji at once. He stood with a blank expression on his face; his eyes glazed over like he was looking at a vast expanse of whiteness, his ears were buzzing with indistinct noise that he could not hear what people were saying around him. After a long time, he felt someone was tugging his arm.

“Jiaozhu, let us go back!” that person said.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and took a sidelong glance. He saw his arm was pulled by Han Lin’er. Han Lin’er’s face was full of anxiety, grief and anger.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said to Zhou Zhiruo, “My Jiaozhu is a righteous hero; just because of a small misunderstanding you married this ... this ... humph, humph!” Actually, he wanted to scold Song Qingshu, but out of respect to Zhou Zhiruo, he swallowed back the word that was on the tip of his tongue.

Although Zhang Wuji had deep feelings toward Zhao Min, he had always thought that he was engaged with Zhou Zhiruo. That day, because he wanted to rescue Yifu, he had no choice but follow Zhao Min. He thought as a sweet and gentle girl, Zhou Zhiruo would understand and would not blame him as long as he honestly told her the reason. Who would have thought that in her rage she married Song Qingshu? The pain in his heart right now far exceeded the pain on his chest when Zhou Zhiruo stabbed him at the

Brightness Peak.

Turning his head, he saw Zhou Zhiruo stretch out her delicate hand, as white as jade, to beckon Song Qingshu. With a very smug expression Song Qingshu walked back to her side, and sat next to her. With a faint smile on the corners of his mouth he said to Zhang Wuji, "When we get married, we did not throw any invitations and thus announced it publicly. Someday, we will invite Sire to enjoy our 'wine of happiness' [orig. xi3jiu3 - wine drunk at a wedding feast]."

Zhang Wuji wanted to say 'thank you' [orig. duo1xie4le5], but his throat was dry; unexpectedly he could not utter these three characters. Han Lin'er pulled his arm and said, "Jiaozhu, don't pay any attention to this kind of person."

Song Qingshu laughed and said, "Han Dage [big brother Han], when the time comes, you also have to enjoy this 'wine of happiness'."

Han Lin'er spat and hatefully said, "I'd rather drink three jars of horse urine than your bad-luck, dead-people's wine." Zhang Wuji sighed; he pulled Han Lin'er's arm and took him away sadly.

In the meantime, the Beggar Clan's Zhang Bang Longtou was engaged in a fiery argument with a Shaolin monk. The exchange among Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo, Song Qingshu and Han Lin'er took place at the Emei Pai shelter, on the northwest corner of the field, so it did not attract anybody's attention; the crowd of warriors was busy listening to the dispute between the Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai.

Zhang Wuji returned to the Ming Cult's shelter and sat down with a troubled mind. He vaguely heard that old Shaolin monk in red kasaya say, "I told you Yuan Zhen Shixiong [martial brother] and Chen Youliang are not in our Temple,

but your precious Clan did not believe me. Your precious Clan's Chuan Gong Zhanglao was unfortunate to meet his death, but our Sect's Kong Ru Shishu [martial uncle] had paid it with his own life. What else do you want?"

Zhang Bang Longtou said, "You said Yuan Zhen and Chen Youliang are not here? I don't believe you! You must let us search Shaolin Temple."

That Shaolin monk sneered and said, "Sire, you want to search Shaolin Temple? Don't you think you are a bit too arrogant? The puny Beggar Clan might not necessarily have the ability to do so."

"You are looking down on the Beggar Clan?" Zhang Bang Longtou said angrily. "Fine, I'll ask you for advice first."

The Shaolin monk replied, "For thousands of years, there have been countless heroes and warriors paying a visit to Shaolin. But because of our founder's mercy, Shaolin has never burned anybody."

The argument of these two was getting hotter by the minute; it looked like they were about to fight soon. Kong Zhi was standing quietly on the side; he did not even try to intervene. Suddenly Situ Qianzhong's weird voice was heard again, "The world's heroes are gathered together at Shaolin today. Some of us had to cover a distance of thousands of 'li's. Are we here to watch the Beggar Clan seeking a revenge?"

"That's right," Xia Zhou said, "The enmity between the Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai can be temporarily set aside. It will not be too late for the two of you to settle your account later. We'd better talk about how we are going to handle that villain Xie Xun first."

“Don’t be foul-mouthed,” Zhang Bang Longtou was indignant. “Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia is one of the Ming Cult’s Protector Kings; what villain are you talking about?”

Xia Zhou thundered, “You are scared of the Ming Cult, I am not scared of them! A villain with a wolf heart and dog lung like Xie Xun and you still honor him as a hero?”

Yang Xiao walked toward the center of the field, cupped his fists around and said, “I am [orig. zai4xia4] the Ming Cult’s Guangming Zuo Shi [left emissary of the brightness]. I have something I’d like to say in front of the world’s heroes. My humble Cult’s Xie Shi Wang has killed innocent people in the past, but actually, he can’t be blamed ...”

“Humph,” Xia Zhou snorted, “Those people he killed are already dead. Do you think you can resurrect them with several sentences of your superficial words?”

Yang Xiao was unfazed; he said, “We are roaming the Jianghu; we lick the blood on our blades on a daily basis. Which one among us has never taken anybody’s life to be able to stay alive until today? One with stronger martial art skill might kill more people. One with inept skill might lose one’s life. If for every life we take we must pay with our own lives, hey, hey, I wonder how many of us, among these several thousands of heroes and warriors in this field, would remain. Xia Lao Yingxiong [old hero Xia], you have never killed people in your whole life?”

The Mongolian occupation of China was a time of chaos; there was trouble and confusion everywhere. As the Wulin characters roamed the Jianghu, they would either kill or be killed. It was quite difficult to cultivate one’s own moral worth. Other than a small number of monks and nuns from

Shaolin Pai and Emei Pai, perhaps it was rare to find anybody whose hands were free from bloodstain.

This Shandong's warrior Xia Zhou was a hot-tempered man; he had injured countless people. Yang Xiao's words had rendered him speechless.

After being dumbfounded for a while, he said, "Bad people we can kill, good people we should not kill. This Xie Xun and the devil heads of the Ming Cult are entirely alike; always do dishonorable deeds. I wish I could cut you in thousands pieces, eat your flesh and sleep on your skin. Humph, humph, the one surnamed Yang, I think you are not a good 'thing'."

He understood that there were many highly skilled people within the Ming Cult, but today he wanted to kill Xie Xun to avenge his brother's death, so a bloody battle against the Ming Cult was unavoidable. Therefore, he spoke boldly without showing any restraint.

A piercing voice came from the Ming Cult shelter, "Xia Zhou, do you think I am a good 'thing'?"

Xia Zhou turned to look at the speaker; he saw a thin-cheeked and sharp-mouthed, pale-faced man; so pale that his face looked gray. Xia Zhou did not know what kind of person this speaker was; he shouted, "I don't know who you are, but since you are one of the Devil Cult's devil heads, I am sure you are not a good 'thing'."

"Xia Xiong [brother Xia]," Situ Qianzhong said, "Don't you know this gentleman? He is one of the Four Protector Kings of the Ming Cult, the Qing Yi Fu Wang."

"Pei, pei!" Xia Zhou spat, "The Blood Sucking Devil!"

Suddenly, while the crowd of warriors was still talking among themselves, Wei Yixiao had arrived in front of Xia Zhou. They were actually more than ten 'zhang's apart, but somehow Wei Yixiao managed to cover that distance in split seconds.

Wei Yixiao raised his hand and 'slap, slap, slap, slap!' he gave Xia Zhou four slaps on his face, followed by an elbow strike toward the acupoint on Xia Zhou's lower abdomen. Actually, Xia Zhou's martial art skill was not so bad. Based on their actual skill levels, Wei Yixiao would need at least fifty stances before he could beat Xia Zhou. However, Wei Yixiao's 'qing gong' skill was too strange for Xia Zhou. He moved like a ghost, like a demon; so because of this element of surprise, by the time Xia Zhou realized the attack and was about to parry, the strike had already arrived.

While the crowd of warriors was crying out in shock, a white shadow flew from the Ming Cult's shelter. It was inferior to Wei Yixiao's lightning speed, yet the shadow was faster than a galloping horse. As the shadow reached Xia Zhou, a large cloth sack opened, went down on his head, and scooped him inside the sack. It was not until the shadow slung the sack on his shoulder did the crowd of warriors finally see that the shadow was a giggling Buddhist monk, the Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude.

Shuo Bude laughed and said, "A good thing, you are a good thing! The monk will take you home and cook you slowly for my dinner!" Carrying Xia Zhou along, light as a feather he swiftly returned to the wooden shelter.

This attack on Xia Zhou happened very quickly and ended just as quick. Although he was surrounded by a dozen friends and fellow martial brothers, the two men from the enemy side were too fast that nobody was able to render their assistance. Only after Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude were back to

their seats that these dozen or so people unsheathed their weapons and charged toward the Ming Cult's shelter with loud shouting and cursing.

Shuo Bude pulled open the sack's mouth and said with a laugh, "Just return to your seats nicely and sit down quietly. After the meeting is over, I will let him go. If you are not obedient, the old monk will urinate into this cloth sack, or put some dung inside, or the best I can do is farting into the sack. Do you believe me or not?" As he said that, he put his hand onto his belt, as if he was ready to take his pants off.

These dozen or so people were so angry that their faces turned green and yellow, but remembering that these Ming Cult people would not stop at anything, they believed that he would do what he said he would do. They also realized that their skills were insufficient to help Xia Zhou. If this bald thief really urinated on his head, Xia Lao Yingxiong would certainly kill himself. They looked at each other, and then they returned to their seats with a dejected look on their faces.

Watching this affair, the crowd of heroes was startled and amused at the same time. When they went up the mountain, they were in high spirits, thinking that they were going to witness the execution of Xie Xun. But as they saw the skills of these two Ming Cult warriors, they realized that this assembly could turn dangerous. Even if they were successful in killing Xie Xun, the field would unavoidably be soaked with blood, and corpses would be scattered everywhere. They could not restrain trepidation from creeping into their hearts.

They saw Situ Qianzhong, with a wine cup in his left hand and a wine gourd in his right, walk toward the center of the field while shaking his head. "There is indeed a lively event worthy to be watched today," he said, "Some want to kill Xie

Xun, some want to save him. But after going back and forth, whether Xie Xun is really at the Shaolin Temple or not, is still left to our own speculation. I'll say: Kong Zhi Dashi, why don't you invite Jin Mao Shi Wang to come out so that everybody can see him first. And then, those of want to kill and those who want to save, can show their true ability by competing against each other. Don't you think it will be interesting?"

At his words, most of the warriors around the field applauded and cheered loudly. Yang Xiao thought, "Xie Shi Wang [lion king Xie] has too many enemies. Even with Ming Cult and the Beggar Clan's combined forces, we simply cannot fight the heroes from all over the world. It will be better to divert their attention to the Tulong Saber and stir up these warriors to fight each other." Thereupon with a loud and clear voice he said, "All the warriors under the heavens are gathered here at the Shaolin Temple today, first, to settle the unfinished business of gratitude and grudges with Xie Shi Wang; second ... hey hey! I am afraid everybody wants to get their hands on this treasured Tulong Saber. If we follow Mr. Situ's suggestion, everybody will fight everybody else and then after when all is said and done, I wonder who will get the precious Saber?"

As the crowd heard him, they thought he was speaking reasonably. Besides, among these several thousand people, perhaps only a little over a hundred people who truly had intense and deep-hatred toward Xie Xun. Without realizing it, their hearts were beating faster as soon as they thought about the 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wulin zhi zun], four characters.

A black-bearded old man stood up and said, "I wonder what kind of person is in possession of the Tulong Saber, would Yang Zuo Shi inform us?"

“This matter is also unclear to me,” Yang Xiao replied, “I am afraid we must consult Kong Zhi Chanshi [honorific title for a Buddhist monk].”

Kong Zhi shook his head without saying anything. The crowd of heroes was secretly dissatisfied, they all thought, “Shaolin Pai is the host and initiator of this assembly, but Kong Wen Fangzhang is suddenly ill and cannot come out; this Kong Zhi Chanshi is so lethargic that it looks like he is half dead. I wonder what kind of trick they are playing.”

A middle-aged man in dark-green coarse long robe stood up and said, “Although Kong Zhi Chanshi does not know, Xie Shi Wang certainly does. Let us invite him to come out and inquire of him. Afterwards, each one of us can play around with our true skills. Whose martial art skill is number one under the heavens will be clear to us; naturally, he is worthy to bear the ‘wulin zhi zun’ title. No matter in whose hands the Saber is, he should hand it over to the ‘wulin zhi zun’. If you ask me, I’ll say we must agree to this first to avoid any dispute in the future. If he refuses to hand it over, all the heroes under the heavens will rally together to attack him. Gentlemen, what do you think?”

Zhang Wuji recognized the speaker as one of the three Qinghai Pai sword masters who joined the attack to the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan the other night.

Situ Qianzhong said, “Won’t that be a martial art competition? [orig. da2 lei4 tai2 – beating drum on the platform; as martial art competition on those days was usually held on a raised platform, with people beating drums on the side] I think it is completely inappropriate.”

“Any why not?” that man in the dark-green robe coldly asked, “Are you saying that we should not compete in a martial art,

but compete on liquor capacity? If that's the case, then which thousand bells [Situ Qianzhong means Situ (surname) 'thousand bells'] is not drunk, whoever gets drunk but does not die [Situ Qianzhong's title was 'zui bu si' (drunk but did not die)], will be crowned the 'wulin zhi zun'."

The crowd broke up in laughter. Some in the crowd said with a strange voice, "Why do we have to compete then? This 'wulin zhi zun' title would certainly belong to the 'zui bu si', Mr. Situ!"

Situ Qianzhong tipped his wine gourd to pour a cup of wine, and then tilting his head backwards he drank it in one gulp. "I don't dare, I don't dare!" he said earnestly, "To win the title 'jiu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the wine world], I, 'zui bu si' might have a thirty percent chance; but 'wulin zhi zun', ha ha .. I don't dare to accept the challenge; I don't dare ..." To the man in the dark-green robe he said, "Since Sire has raised this issue, your martial art knowledge must have transcended the mortal world attainment. Under my faulty vision, I actually do not know Sire's illustrious name."

That man coldly said, "I am Ye Changqing of Qinghai Pai; both my drinking capacity and my clowning skills are inferior to Sire's." He implied that 'in martial art skill, I am much stronger than Sire.'

Situ Qianzhong tilted his head sideways and thought for half a day. "Qinghai Pai?" he said, "Never heard. Ye Changqing? Hm, hm ... never heard either."

Everybody thought, "This Old Situ has such a nerve. Insulting Ye Changqing one man is all right, but he dares to insult the entire Qingjai Pai; wonder if he has a formidable backer behind him? Or did he have an unresolved enmity against Qinghai Pai? Just based on these few words, I am

afraid Qinghai Pai would not let him go easily.” Only those who knew Situ Qianzhong well realized that he was always alone, without anybody to back him up. He also did not have any enmity against the Qinghai Pai. He simply was a brassy man, who loved to argue and did not exercise control over his own tongue. Although he had suffered countless troubles in his life, his behavior did not change.

Murderous intent started to grow in Ye Changqing’s heart, but his face remained calm when he said, “Qinghai Pai and the Ol’ Ye are indeed obscure names, no wonder Sire did not know. But since Sire said martial art competition was inappropriate, while in drinking wine [orig. ‘pouring yellow soup’] competition Sire’s skill is unequalled under the heavens, then how would we resolve this problem? Please advice.”

“ ‘Unequalled under the heavens’ is truly much easier said than done,” Situ Qianzhong said, “Truly much easier said than done. Back then, when I was at Jinan Prefecture [capital of Shandong, northeastern China] ...”

“Zui Bu Si,” he was about to prattle along when someone in the crowd shouted, “Don’t get drunk in here! We don’t have time to listen to your nonsense.” Another man shouted, “What about Xie Xun? What about the Tulong Saber?” Yet another man shouted, “Kong Zhi Chanshi, you are the host of this hero’s assembly, are you inviting us here to listen to this empty talk? What kind of assembly is this?” In short, the people wanted Situ Qianzhong to shut up, and for Kong Zhi to take charge of the situation. These people were shouting from among the crowd, some far, some near, they were from all directions.

Situ Qianzhong said, “Shi Laoda [old (big) man Shi] from Jiangling [a place in Hubei] prefecture’s Hei Feng Zhai [black

wind fort], you don't have to worry. Although your Hei Sha Zhang [black sand palm] is fierce, you will not necessarily be able to defeat the 'Unequalled under the heavens'. Poyang Lake's 'shui di jin ao' [mythological golden turtle from the bottom of Poyang Lake] Hou Xiongdi [brother Hou], that Xie Shi Wang [lion king Xie] possesses an excellent water skill; you won't be able to take advantage of him with your underwater skill. Much less they still have one 'Zi Shan Long Wang' [purple-robed dragon king] who has not made her appearance yet. Hey, hey, how can turtle and fish compete against the dragon king? Mount Qingyang's [a place in Anhui] Wu San Lang [third lad surnamed Wu], if you are dreaming of snatching the Tulong Saber with your sword, you must be blind ..."

This man might talk like a madman, but he had a skill that surpassed others; his network of acquaintances was broad, his hearing was keen. From a bustling and random noise of the people shouting, he was able to call the surname and special skill of each speaker, one by one, without any mistake. The crowd of warriors realized this special skill of his; they could not help but break out in cheers.

An old monk behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "Shaolin Pai is ashamed to be the host; as luck would have it, our Fangzhang [Abbot] has suddenly fallen ill. Nobody is in charge of this grand assembly, and in the end we become the laughingstock of everybody present. Xie Xun and the Tulong Saber are two separate matters, but they are two in one and one in two, which can be handled together. According to Lao Na, what this Ye Shizhu [benefactor] of Qinghai Pai said is very reasonable. There are countless brave people with outstanding ability among the attending heroes. We only need everybody to demonstrate each one's skill. Whoever stays standing at the end will have the right to handle Xie Xun; the Tulong Saber will also be his. Let the heroes

consider; isn't it a good idea?"

Zhang Wuji asked Peng Yingyu, "Who is this monk?"

Peng Yingyu shook his head. "Subordinate does not know," he said, "This monk did not participate in the besieging of the Brightness Peak. He also was not one of those held captive by Junzhu Niangniang at the Wanan Temple. But since he repeatedly speaks in front of Kong Zhi Dashi, his position in the Temple must not be low."

Zhao Min said in a low voice, "Nine out of ten, this man belongs to Yuan Zhen gang. I am guessing that Kong Wen Fangzhang has fallen into Yuan Zhen's hands. Kong Zhi Dashi thereupon is forced to comply with these rebels' wish. That's why he looks so gloomy and dispirited."

Zhang Wuji's heart sank; "Peng Dashi, what do you think?" he asked.

"Junzhu's guess makes sense," Peng Yingyu replied, "Only Shaolin Temple is full of martial art masters. Yuan Zhen's his nerves must be too big to have the courage to openly defy his superior and create trouble."

"Yuan Zhen has made preparations long time ago," Zhang Wuji said, "First, he wants to destroy our Cult; second, he wants to gain control over the Beggar Clan. Both deceitful attempts failed when success was just in sight. This time, I believe he wants to be the Shaolin Pai's Zhang Men Fangzhang [sect leader, abbot]."

"To be Zhang Men Fangzhang might not be enough," Zhao Min said.

"Shaolin Pai is the number one Sect in the Wulin world,"

Zhang Wuji said, "Being the Zhang Men Fangzhang is the pinnacle of achievement; nothing can be higher than that."

"How about 'wulin zhi zun'?" Zhao Min asked, "Isn't 'the most revered in the Wulin world' higher than Shaolin Pai's Zhang Men Fangzhang?"

"He wants to be the 'wulin zhi zun'?" Zhang Wuji asked absentmindedly.

"Wuji Gege," Zhao Min said, "Just because Zhou Jiejie [elder sister] married another man, you become muddle-headed, and cannot think about anything else clearly."

As the secret of his heart was exposed, Zhang Wuji blushed. "Zhang Wuji," he silently scolded himself, "You must not be engrossed in one thing and care about man-woman relationship only, and thus setting the important matter of rescuing Yifu aside." Calming himself down, he thought about how Yuan Zhen was really farsighted; today's great assembly was part of his grand schemes, so there must be something greater than what meets the eye. "Min Mei," he said, "What do you think Yuan Zhen's real intention is?"

Zhao Min said, "This man Yuan Zhen is very cunning; extremely intelligent ..."

Zhou Dian, who had been listening on the side this conversation in low voice, finally could not restrain himself from cut in, "Junzhu Niangniang, you are also very cunning and extremely intelligent. I'll say you are not the least bit inferior to Yuan Zhen."

Zhao Min laughed, "You flatter me too much," she said.

Zhou Dian said, "Not too much ..."

“Dian Xiong,” Peng Yingyu cut him off, “Do not interrupt Junzhu Niangniang.”

Zhou Dian was indignant. “You interrupted me first ...” he said.

Peng Yingyu smiled without saying anything. He was well aware that bickering with Zhou Dian for two to four hours [orig. one or two ‘sichen’, 1 sichen = 2-hour] was not unusual; therefore, he would rather not respond.

“Why don’t you say anything?” Zhou Dian asked.

“You told me not to interrupt you; I won’t interrupt you,” Peng Yingyu replied.

“But you have already interrupted me,” Zhou Dian said.

“Then please continue whatever you were going to say,” Peng Yingyu said.

“I’ve forgotten already, I don’t remember what I was going to say,” Zhou Dian said.

Zhao Min laughed and continued, “I thought that if Yuan Zhen’s sole objective was to be Shaolin Temple Abbot, he did not need to gather all the heroes under the heavens here. Xia Daxia has already fallen into his hands, why would he want the heroes to fight over him? Wuji Gege, speaking about martial art skill, I am afraid nobody in the world is superior to you. It’s impossible that Yuan Zhen did not know this fact. I don’t think he is being nice by arranging all heroes under the heavens to gather here so that you can defeat them all and become the ‘wulin zhi zun’. It is like he is offering Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber to you for free.”

Zhang Wuji, Peng Yingyu and Zhou Dian nodded and asked, "What do you think is his real plot?"

At this time Yang Xiao walked over toward Zhang Wuji and joined the discussion, "I have been thinking, this traitor Yuan Zhen's evil scheme must not be a simple one ..."

Zhou Dian could not bear not to comment, "Yuan Zhen is our Cult's archenemy. Junzhu Niangniang, you were once also our Cult's archenemy. This traitor Yuan Zhen is very cunning and extremely intelligent, Junzhu Niangniang, you are also very cunning and extremely intelligent. I say the two of you are on par with each other."

"You are talking rubbish!" Yang Xiao scolded him.

With a faint smile Zhao Min continued, "What Mr. Zhou said makes sense. If I were Yuan Zhen, how would I carry out my conspiracy? Mmm ... first, I would persuade Kong Wen Fangzhang to send out mass invitation to all heroes under the heavens, requesting them to come to Shaolin Temple. Kong Wen Fangzhang is a devout Buddhist; a person of mercy and peace. Naturally, he did not want to be meddlesome in other people's business; but all I need to do is mention the names of Kong Jian and Kong Xing, two Shen Seng. Kong Wen Fangzhang loves his martial brothers very much, so, he gave his permission. Furthermore, if Shaolin Temple wanted to kill Xie Daxia, the enmity with the Ming Cult would be as deep as the ocean. Based on one Sect's power alone, Shaolin might not necessarily be able to resist Ming Cult's full-force attack; but if Shaolin shifted the blame to the heroes from all over the world, certainly the Ming Cult could not massacre several thousand attending warriors, could it?"

Everybody nodded their heads in agreement. Zhao Min continued, "Once the great assembly is in progress, I would not show my own face; I'll let others use Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber as a bait to provoke the heroes and warriors to kill each other. Inevitably, The Ming Cult would have to fight countless enemies. After the battle is over, it doesn't matter who win or lose, the Ming Cult force would be decreased by half and its power would diminish considerably."

"Exactly," Zhang Wuji said, "I have had the same concern, but Yifu's kindness to me was as heavy as the mountain. He also has dozens of years of friendship with our brethrens. How can we sit down without trying to save him? Ay, we have been on this mountain only for several days, Grandfather had already died. That traitor Yuan Zhen must be clapping and cheering in his hiding place."

Zhao Min continued, "At the end of the battle, most likely Zhang Jiaozhu will be crowned the number one martial artist; so the Shaolin monks would say, 'Zhang Jiaozhu's skill surpasses all the heroes. You are worthy of the honor and the accolades. Our Temple sincerely hands over Xie Daxia to Zhang Jiaozhu. Would Zhang Jiaozhu please go to the hill peak behind the Temple to welcome him?' Thereupon everybody would climb the peak together; Zhang Jiaozhu must break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'. If anybody stepped forward to assist him, Yuan Zhen's crony would say, 'The one defeating all the warriors was Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult; it has nothing to do with anybody else. It would be better for Sire to stand on the side and watch.' In his effort to win the title of number one martial artist in the world, even if Zhang Jiaozhu did not suffer any injury, his internal energy would be consumed I don't know how much; by that time, how can he be the three monks' match? In the end, not only Xie Daxia could not be rescued, he would die among the three green pines instead. Only the cold moon and the bitter wind would

accompany the body of the great hero of this generation, Zhang Wuji. Tell me, isn't my scheme wonderful?"

Listening to this point, the group of warriors' countenances changed; they believed Zhao Min's words were not meant to frighten anybody. Zhang Wuji's courage and uprightness was outstanding; he would not care how much suffering and calamity he had to endure, he would definitely try to rescue Xie Xun. Even if he had to lose his life, he would never regret his decision. Yuan Zhen had accurately seen these traits on Zhang Wuji; he knew that Zhang Wuji would jump into a mountain of blades or pot of oil.

Zhao Min sighed and said, "This way, the Ming Cult's demise is guaranteed. Yuan Zhen would carry out his evil plot further. He would poison Kong Wen, and put the blame on Kong Zhi Dashi. This scheme would be very easy to do, he would only need to fabricate false evidence, and the Shaolin monks would believe him. Consequently, his cronies would unanimously recommend him as the logical candidate to take over Fangzhang position. He, Senior, would issue a decree for the warriors to besiege the Ming Cult. Relying on numbers to achieve victory, he would annihilate the Ming Cult. At that time, the title number one martial artist in the world, I am afraid other people would be unable to take it away from him. If Tulong Saber did not appear, so be it. But if in the Jianghu the trail of this precious Saber reappeared, everybody would know that the rightful owner of this Saber would be the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Yuan Zhen Shen Seng. If the owner of the Saber was unwilling to hand this Saber away, I am afraid he would be in a precarious position!"

Although Zhao Min was speaking in a low voice, several people in the wooden shelter were intently listening to her. As she finished speaking, Zhou Dian slapped his own thigh and called out, "Exactly, exactly! What an excellent evil

plan!" Unconsciously, his voice grew loud that most of the people around the field heard him. Everybody turned their eyes toward the Ming Cult's shelter.

"What kind of excellent evil plan?" Situ Qianzhong asked, "Can you tell it to this old man?"

"Definitely not!" Zhou Dian said, "The Old Man [referring to himself] wants to sow dissension so that the heroes from all over the world would kill each other, to the point that you die, I live. If I tell you, won't the evil plan lose its effectiveness?"

"Wonderful, wonderful!" Situ Qianzhong laughed, "But how are you going to sow dissension? Would you elaborate?"

Zhou Dian loudly said, "I am thinking of an ingenious evil plan; I would tell a lie by saying that the Old Man has the Tulong Saber in his possession. Whoever possesses the strongest martial art, the Old Man would hand over the Tulong Saber to him ..."

"What a plan! What a conspiracy!" Situ Qianzhong called out, "And then what?"

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji exchanged a glance, they both thought, "This drunkard is neither our relative nor our friend, but he is a great help to us."

Zhou Dian loudly said, "Just think, this precious Saber is known as the 'wulin zhi zun'; who won't fight with his all might to get hold of it? Thereupon, the lunatic would be killed by the drunkard, the drunkard would be killed by the monk, the monk would be killed by the priest, the priest would be killed by the young lady ... the killing would continue, the field would be littered with dead bodies, blood would flow like a river. Woohoo! What a pity! What an awful

sight!”

As soon as the crowd of heroes heard him, they shivered in fear; thinking that although this man acted like a lunatic, his words actually made a perfect sense. Kongtong Pai's Er Lao [second elder] Zong Weixia stood up and said, “This gentleman, Mr. Zhou, actually has a point. We are honest and upright people, we do not speak in riddles; it is unavoidable that every school and every sect has an interest in the Tulong Saber. However, I think it is not worthwhile to lose our reputation just for the sake of the Saber, or even go as far as the destruction of the entire sect. I wish everybody will not bicker over it, to honor our martial art code of brotherhood, to the point that our friendship will not be harmed regardless of victory or defeat. What do you think?”

At the Brightness Peak, Zhang Wuji had shown him kindness by healing his internal injury due to the ‘Qi Shang Quan’ [seven-injury fist] training. Afterwards, Zhang Wuji also saved him from the Wan An Temple Pagoda. This time Kongtong Pai came to Shaolin Temple with the intention of providing assistance to the Ming Cult.

Situ Qianzhong said with a laugh, “I see you are a big fellow, but you are afraid of death. If nobody spills any blood and nobody loses his life, the martial art contest will not be worth seeing.”

Kongtong Pai's Si Lao [fourth elder], Chang Jingzhi angrily said, “To hurt a drunkard like you, I don't need to spill your blood.”

“The drunkard is only joking,” Situ Qianzhong said, “Why should Mr. Chang the Fourth be this angry? Everybody knows Kongtong Pai's Qi Shang Quan can kill anybody without spilling any blood. Didn't Kong Jian Shen Seng of Shaolin

Temple die under the Qi Shang Quan? How can my old bones, the drunkard surnamed Situ, be compared to Kong Jian Shen Seng?"

The crowd of heroes thought, "This drunkard is offending both the Kongtong Pai and Shaolin Pai. It's a wonder that he can survive this long roaming in the Jianghu the way he is."

Zong Weixia ignored his remarks and said in a loud voice, "In my opinion, each school, sect, clan or society is to nominate two of their masters. These masters will compete in martial art skill, and whoever has the highest martial art skill will have the right to handle Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber."

The crowd of heroes applauded loudly; they all said that this is the best proposal ever.

Zhang Wuji carefully looked at the monks behind Kong Zhi; most of them frowned, as if they were displeased with this turn of events. He knew Zhao Min's speculation on Yuan Zhen's evil plot was correct; he indeed wanted to provoke the crowd of heroes to kill each other.

A white faced middle-aged man with little moustache stood up; his hand waved a folding fan with golden spine, his face was rather good-looking. He said, "I believe Zong Er Xia's [second hero Zong] proposal is very good. When we compete in martial art, although we will stop at touching the opponent, we must remember that weapons, fists and legs do not have eyes. If anybody slips, that can be considered a fate. Martial brothers and friends shall not come out to seek revenge. Otherwise, the fight will continue without conclusion."

"That's right," the crowd of heroes replied, "Let it be so."

With a shrill voice Situ Qianzhong said, "This brother, the good-looking gentleman with laughter in his speech, could you be Ouyang Xiongtai ['xiongtai' is yet another way of saying 'brother'] of Hengyang prefecture in Xiang Nan [southern Hunan]?"

That man shook his folding fan twice and laughed. "I do not dare. Such a humble name," he said, "You flattered me in one sentence and insulted with me the next."

Situ Qianzhong said, "It seems like Ouyang Xiong and I are loners [orig. 'gu1hun2ye3gui' – lonely soul, wild ghost]; we do not belong to any clan, society, school or sect. I like wine, you like women. How about the two of us found the 'jiu se pai' [wine and sex sect, or drunkard and lecher sect]? Then our Jiuse Pai's two masters will stand hand in hand to face the world's masters together."

The crowd of heroes broke out in laughter again, thinking that this Situ Qianzhong repeatedly blurting jokes, creating happy atmosphere, inciting not a few laughter around the meeting place; and thus reducing the hostility inside the hearts of many people.

Peng Yingyu informed Zhang Wuji that this white-faced man was Ouyang Muzhi, altogether, he had twelve concubines. Although his martial art was strong, very seldom did he roam around the Jianghu. He spent his days snuggling with his women, enjoying the soft and tender happiness.

Ouyang Muzhi laughed and said, "If we join hands to found a sect, I am afraid my family heritage will not be enough to buy you the wine. Ladies and Gentlemen, speaking of martial art competition, we may want to elect several venerable seniors to act as referees and arbitrators. Otherwise, you say 'I win', and I say 'I win', and thus the dispute continues."

Situ Qianzhong laughed, "Won't we know it if we win or we lose? Who would be as shameless as you are?"

Zong Weixia said, "Electing several arbitrators is good. Shaolin Pai is the host, naturally Kong Zhi Dashi will be one."

Situ Qianzhong pointed his finger to Shou Bude's sack and said, "I nominate Shandong Daxia [great hero of Shandong], Xia Zhou, Xia Lao Yingxiong."

Shou Bude lifted up his sack and tossed it toward Situ Qianzhong. "One arbitrator coming up!" he said with a laugh.

Situ Qianzhong put down his wine gourd and wine cup. Carrying the cloth sack, he tried to loosen up the cord tied around the sack mouth. Unexpectedly, the knot and the thread were the result of Shou Bude's special skill; the thread was braided from golden silk and fish bladder strands. Situ Qianzhong struggled with all his might, but was unable to untie the knot. Shou Bude laughed out loud and leaped forward. His left hand picked the sack and slung it behind his back. His right hand reached up, his ten fingers twisted and turned; then he heaved the sack to the front again. After heaving the sack back and forth, the knot on the sack mouth was loosened. Turning the sack over and shaking it, Xia Zhou rolled out the sack. Situ Qianzhong hastily reached out to unseal Xia Zhou's acupoint.

After being kept inside the dark cloth sack for half a day and now suddenly he was let out, Xia Zhou found the bright sunlight dazzled his eyes. And then he realized that thousands pairs of eyes were looking at him. He could not bear the shame and wanted to die. Turning around, he pulled the dagger on his waist and stabbed it into the pit of his own stomach.

Situ Qianzhong quickly reached out to grab him with both hands and laughed while saying, "Victory and defeat is common within the martial art practitioners. Xia Dage, why is your heart so dull?"

From among the crowd, a short and plump man shouted loudly, "I am afraid the hero inside the cloth sack is not qualified to be an arbitrator. I nominate Sun Laoyezi [old master Sun] of Mount Changbai." A middle-aged woman also said, "Zhe Dong Shuang Yi's [pair of righteous from eastern Zhejiang] prestige shakes the Jiangnan; these two brothers are upright and selfless. They are perfect candidates for the arbitrators." From here and there the crowd of heroes shouted names and very quick there were more than a dozen arbitrators; all were prestigious and respectable heroes of the Jianghu.

Suddenly from within the Emei Pai crowd an old nun coldly said, "What's the use of electing arbitrators? There is no need of them from the start." Her voice was not loud at all, but it went straight into everybody's eardrums. Apparently her internal energy cultivation was quite deep.

Situ Qianzhong laughed. "I beg Shitai's pardon; why don't we need arbitrators?" he asked.

The old nun replied, "Two people fight, the victor lives, the loser dies. Let Yanwu Ye [the ruler of the netherworld] be the arbitrator."

Listening to these cold and cruel words, everybody felt chill creeping up their backs.

Situ Qianzhong said, "We are friends in the martial art world, we also do not have any grudges or enmity against each

other; why should we fight a live and death battle against each other? Those who left their homes should practice mercy. By saying those words, isn't Shitai afraid of Buddha's rebuke?"

The old nun coldly replied, "You can talk nonsense in front of other people, but you should watch your manners in front of Emei Pai disciples."

Situ Qianzhong raised his wine gourd and poured a cup. 'Tsk, tsk, tsk! What a fierce Emei Pai!' he said, "There is a saying that a good man would not fight a woman, good drunkard would not fight a nun!" Raising his hand, the cup was just about to touch his lips when suddenly two 'whiz! whiz!' noise split the air, as two tiny objects, as small as a prayer bead, were shot. One flew toward the wine cup, the other flew toward the wine gourd. These two projectiles were immediately followed by another one, aimed at Situ Qianzhong's chest.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' three loud explosions were heard successively, as the three prayer beads exploded. The gourd and the wine cup were smashed at once, while a large hole appeared on Situ Qianzhong's chest. He was thrown several 'zhang's backward from the explosion, while his clothes were burning.

Xia Zhou immediately rushed forward, but Situ Qianzhong had already died, with a frozen smile on his face. Apparently, because the prayer beads were coming and exploding so fast, he did not even realize that death was at the door. It was just like a sudden thunder in a clear blue sky. There were plenty of experienced warriors with vast knowledge among the crowd, yet nobody had ever seen this kind of fast and deadly secret projectile.

“The nun is serious!” Zhou Dian called out, “What kind of secret projectile was that?”

In low voice Yang Xiao said, “I heard there is a big country in the western region where someone is perfecting technique to manufacture gunpowder into some kind of secret projectiles. It is called ‘pi li lei huo dan’ [Translator’s note: ‘pi li’ – thunderbolt, ‘lei’ is also thunder, ‘huo’ – fire, ‘dan’ bullet. Shall we call it ‘thunderbolt bullet’ for short? Actually, it was closer to modern day grenade, but the original says it was a ‘bullet’]. The gunpowder is concealed inside, and it is shot out using a powerful spring mechanism. It seems to me this old nun is using that fellow’s invention.”

Carrying Situ Qianzhong’s black burning body, Xia Zhou said in loud voice, “Although this Situ Xiongdi often said harsh and sometimes mean words, it was because he loved to fool around, his character was actually kind. He had never harmed anybody nor committed any dishonorable acts in his life. Today, the heroes from all over the world are gathered here, which one of you can say that he had done any evil conduct?”

The crowd of heroes was completely silent. Xia Zhou pointed his finger toward the old nun and angrily said, “Emei Pai has always been known as upright and chivalrous school; who would have thought that they are capable of using such an evil and ruthless secret projectile? Even the strong in the Wulin world will not overstep the ‘appropriateness’ of character. [orig. ‘li’ – reason, logic, truth] May I know Shitai’s title?”

The old nun replied, “I am called Jing Jia. The ‘hero inside the sack’, what do you want by talking and gesticulating like that?”

Xia Zhou mournfully said, "The one surnamed Xia's skill is inadequate, thus falling miserably under the Ming Cult's devil head's insult. That was the surnamed Xia's own weakness; yet I did not damage my lifelong reputation of the way of chivalry. Jing Jia Shitai, you are this vicious; aren't you doing a great disservice to your precious sect's founder, Guo Xiang, Gu Nuxia [heroine Guo]?"

Hearing him bring up the venerated name of their founder, the Emei disciples sprang up on their feet. Jing Jia's eyebrows rose up. "Can a bastard like you casually mention our founder's revered name?" she roared.

"You have disgraced your founder's revered name by doing many unrighteous acts," Xia Zhou retorted, "Not to mention Guo Nuxia, even Mijue Shitai, when she was alive, she was cruel and merciless but her sword had never taken innocent people's lives. You have killed an innocent man like this and your Zhangmen [sect leader] surprisingly did not care. Hey, hey, after today, can Emei Pai take its stand in the Jianghu?"

"If you carry on talking half a sentence more of those nonsense talk, this drunkard will be your example," Jiang Jia said.

Xia Zhou's anger welled up in his chest, he courageously took two big strides forward and said, "If the Emei Pai Zhangmen will not clean up her own school, Emei Pai will be held in contempt by the world's heroes from now on."

The crowd of warriors, as well as the Emei Pai disciples, turned their gaze toward Zhou Zhiruo. They saw her nodding slowly to Jing Jia. 'Bang! Bang!' two loud explosions followed as Jing Jia shot out two 'thunderbolt bullets'. Two large holes appeared on Xia Zhou's chest and lower abdomen; his clothes were burning. But in his unyielding spirit, although

his breathing had ceased, he was still standing, with his arms still around Situ Qianzhong's body.

The crowd of heroes looked at each other in utter shock. After a moment, several hundred people raised a clamor, condemning Emei Pai's ruthlessness. Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude exchanged a glance, nodded at each other, and then rushed toward Xia Zhou's remains. They knelt down in front of the corpse.

"Xia Lao Yingxiong," Shuo Bude said, "The two of us did not know your chivalry and uprightness, and thus have offended you much. We are very ashamed of our conducts."

They both raised their palms and then 'slap, slap, slap, slap' they slapped their own faces that their cheeks turned red and swollen immediately. They extinguished the fire still burning on the two corpses, and then carried the bodies into Ming Cult's wooden shelter.

Zhang Wuji was deeply grieved seeing Zhou Zhiruo suddenly become so cruel and heartless.

Amidst the clamor of the crowd, Zhou Zhiruo was seen whispering into Song Qingshu's ear. Song Qingshu nodded, and then in deliberate steps he walked toward the center of the field. In a loud and clear voice he said, "The heroes and warriors assembled here today, not to drink wine and discuss poetry, to play the zither, beat the drum or pluck the harp; nor do we come here to compose a poem by each one contributing a line. This is the place where we clash our weapons, our fists and feet. That being the case, most likely there will be casualties. This Xia Lao Yingxiong had just said that in all his life, Mr. Situ had never done anything evil, and blamed our Sect's Jing Jia Shitai for indiscriminately killed an innocent. The honorable heroes raised up a clamor,

seemingly discontent of our Sect. Xiongdi [brother, referring to self] wants to ask something: do we have to verify moral character and virtuosity of each other first before we contend in martial art today? A sage or a saint must never, ever be harmed; while the poor, ominous, extremely evil people can be killed at will?" The crowd was taken aback and was at a loss momentarily; they thought that what he said was not totally without any reason.

Song Qingshu continued, "If we say that only a virtuous person can own the Tulong Saber, why should we hold a 'martial art competition'? Why don't we all go visit the Confucius temple inside the great city of Qufu in Shandong, and respectfully present the Saber to Confucius' descendant over there? If we are still speaking about this 'wu' [martial art] character, then what we concern about most is life or death, victory or defeat. I am afraid we won't be able to deal with other people's 'innocence' or 'guilt'."

"That's right," several people responded from among the crowd, "Saber and spear do not have eyes. We have agreed that we must not seek revenge."

The more they listened to Song Qingshu, the more Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting felt that this person's accent was somewhat familiar. However, with the short beard, this man looked different; besides, he kept saying 'our sect this' and 'our sect that'. Consequently, he must be an Emei Pai male disciple. Therefore, they could not help but feeling doubtful.

Yu Lianzhou stood up and said, "May I know Sire's honorable surname and great given name?"

Seeing his Er Shishu [second martial (younger) uncle], Song Qingshu was rather afraid of Yu Lianzhou's longstanding prestige; he stammered for a while before answering, "I am a

nameless younger generation, not worth Yu Er Xia's [second hero Yu] inquiry."

In stern voice Yu Lianzhou said, "Sire did not stop talking about 'martial art competition'. I presume your martial art study must have reached excellence. My Shifu had received great kindness from your precious sect's Guo Nuxia in his childhood; thereupon he instructed Wudang disciples not to fight with Emei Pai. I [orig. zai4xia4] must understand clearly, whether Sire is truly Emei disciple or not. What is your name? Real men should be straightforward and upright; why would you conceal your own identity?"

Brushing away the dust from her clothes, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Yu Er Xia, I don't have to conceal anything from you. This man is my husband; surname Song, given name Qingshu. He was related to Wudang, but this time he has entered the Emei's school. If Yu Er Xia has anything to say, you can tell it to me."

She spoke those words with a clear, but cold voice, as cold as a torrential river and frozen ice. Her manner and movements were as exquisite as a jade, her countenance was clear and beautiful; indeed she looked like an immortal rising from among the dust. There were thousands of heroes around the field, yet nobody made any noise, they all held their breath, trying to listen with full attention.

Song Qingshu reached up to rub his face, peeling the short beard from his chin and taking his hat off; immediately he emerged as a young man as handsome as a jade crown.

As the crowd of heroes saw him, they could not restrain from praising in their hearts, "What a beautiful pair of immortals!"

Remembering Song Qingshu's offense in killing his Qidi

[seventh (younger) brother] Mo Shenggu, anger rose up in Yu Lianzhou's breast. However, his character had always been calm; in the last few years, the older he got, the deeper was his self-control. Although he was furious, he managed to keep a calm face; only his eyes flickered like lightning, sweeping Song Qingshu's face.

Song Qingshu hung his head down in shame. Zhou Zhiruo said, "My husband has left Wudang and joined Emei. Hereby I am making it official today in the presence of these world's heroes. Yu Er Xia, Zhang Zhenren does not allow Wudang disciples to fight our Sect's disciples for the sake of friendship of the former days. It shows the Senior's 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood]; but it might also show how smart the Senior is in preserving Wudang's prestige."

Yin Liting could not hold his patience much longer; leaping forward, he pointed his finger toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, "Miss Zhou, when you faced calamity in your childhood, it was my Shifu who held out his hands to save you, and brought you to the Emei Pai. My Shifu has never wished for you to repay his kindness, yet in what you've just said today, you obviously accuse our Wudang Pai of earning false reputation, of being far inferior to the heroines of Emei Pai. This ... you ... aren't you doing my Shifu wrong?"

Zhou Zhiruo laughed indifferently and said, "Wudang's heroes have shaken the Jianghu; obviously you have real ability. Song Daxia is my father-in-law. How can I dare to accuse my in-law of earning false reputation? However, Wudang and Emei two schools have their own history, each developed its own martial art; so it is difficult to say who is superior and who is inferior. In the past, our Sect's Guo Shizu [ancestor, founder] has shown kindness toward Zhang Zhenren, later on, Zhang Zhenren has shown kindness to me. We are even. Nobody owes anybody kindness. Yu Er Xia, Yin

Liu Xia, let us hereby discard the custom that says Wudang disciples must not fight Emei disciples.”

All around the field, the crowd of warriors under their wooden shelters talked among themselves in low voices, “This young Zhangmen is very arrogant; listening to her words, it sounded as if Emei Pai has a high confidence in exceeding the Wudang Pai. Yu Er Xia has reached the pinnacle in term of internal and external power. Extremely few people in the world today can be his match. Could it be that Emei Pai relies on the fierce and evil secret projectiles to dominate the Jianghu?”

Yin Liting was very emotional thinking about Qidi Mo Shenggu’s tragic death; tears flowing down on his face and he cried out, “Qingshu ... Qingshu! You ... why did you kill your ... your Qishu [seventh (younger) martial uncle] ...” As he said the word ‘Qishu’, suddenly he broke into a loud weeping.

The crowd of heroes was surprised; they looked at each other, thinking, “Wudang’s Yin Liu Xia has such a reputation, how can he cry in public?”

Yu Lianzhou stepped forward and pulled Yin Liting’s right arm. With a loud and clear voice he said, “The world’s heroes, please hear this: Wudang is very unfortunate to have a renegade disciple like this Song Qingshu. Our Qidi, Mo Shenggu, was killed by this disciple ...”

Suddenly two ‘whiz! whiz!’ noise split the air. Again, two ‘thunderbolt bullets’ flew toward Yu Lianzhou’s chest.

“Aiyo!” Zhang Wuji called out in alarm and was about to rush forward to save his uncle; but the thunderbolt bullets were simply too fast; while listening to the conversation, he had

never expected Emei Pai would to launch this kind of sneak attack, even if he could move faster, he would still be too late.

This attack was actually also beyond Yu Lianzhou's expectations; his first reaction was to evade, but the bullets would certainly hit the numerous Beggar Clan disciples standing behind him. He surmised that these bullets were meant to deal with him, to close his mouth so that he would not expose publicly Song Qingshu's crime in offending his superior and rebelling against his own father. If he evaded, unavoidably, some innocents would be killed. In the split seconds this thought was flashing through his mind, the two thunderbolt bullets, one after another, had already arrived in front of his chest.

Yu Lianzhou turned his palms around in the 'yun shou' [cloudy hand] stance of the Taiji Fist. With the utmost 'softness', as if his palms were pressing empty air, he dissipated the incoming power with which the 'thunderbolt bullets' were shot, by lightly catching the bullets in the middle of his palms. He was seen standing with his arms outstretched in front of his chest, palms facing the sky, with the two thunderbolt bullets spinning with unfathomable speed in the middle of his palms. The crowd of heroes stood up at once, several thousand pairs of eyes stared at his hands. It was as if their hearts had stopped beating, extremely anxious to see whether these spinning bullets would explode at any moment.

This Taijiquan's special skill of incorporating softness was the softest martial art skill in the world; it was called 'a feather cannot add (to the weight), a fly cannot drop (the weight)'. The main principle was 'sticking' and 'sucking' [create a vacuum], using 'bent' to overcome 'straight', the 'feeble geriatric to defend the crowd', as well as 'hero aiming for the

invincibility'. [Translator's note: I do not know Taiji, so the translation might be inaccurate.]

For the past several years, Yu Lianzhou had diligently and painstakingly trained hard in Zhang Sanfeng's special skill. Seeing Situ Qianzhong and Xia Zhou lose their lives just now, he understood that these bullets would explode as soon as they contacted any hard object; the bullets were very difficult to be dealt with, and in this desperate situation, he had no choice but risking this skill, backed by his entire life's cultivation of power. Sure enough, the soft was able to overcome the hard; the softness of his palms controlled the two thunderbolt bullets that they were spinning just like a drill trying to bore through a thick object, but did not explode.

Suddenly two other 'whiz! whiz!' noises were heard, Emei Pai shot two more thunderbolt bullets toward Yu Lianzhou. Yin Liting was standing next to his Shixiong; immediately both of his palms rose up to meet the thunderbolt bullets in the air. As soon as his palms made contact with the thunderbolt bullets, he executed the 'lan qiao we shi' ['seizing a bird's tail' style] from Taijiquan, by gently catching the thunderbolt bullets, while with the 'jin ji du li shi' ['golden rooster standing' style], his left foot strongly grounded, his right foot in the air, his entire body spin fast, just like a top.

Yin Liting was very skilled in swordsmanship, but his mastery of Taijiquan was not as deep as his Shixiong's. He saw that Yu Lianzhou was straining in catching the two thunderbolt bullets; he was completely aware that if there was the slightest bit of 'hardness' in the palms, the evil and ruthless secret projectiles would explode immediately. Therefore, he dissipated the shooting force by spinning his body and took the thunderbolt bullets spinning along in his palms.

In terms of martial art skill, Yin Liting's way of dissipating the incoming force by catching them midair was slightly inferior compared to Yu Lianzhou using his palm power to neutralize the bullets; however, the way he spun his body rapidly was a lot more attractive. After he spun for more than thirty revolutions, all around the field the crowd broke into thunderous applause, while the thunderbolt bullets also failed to explode.

To everybody's surprise, a series of 'whiz! whiz!' noises were heard again as eight thunderbolt bullets came their way. Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting shouted together and threw the thunderbolt bullets in their hands. Wudang disciples did not use secret projectiles, but they were trained in striking projectiles with projectiles. After catching the enemy's secret projectile, they were able to return the projectile, one projectile striking two, two projectiles striking three. As these two shot the four thunderbolt bullets in their hands, the bullets struck the incoming eight enemy's thunderbolt bullets. 'Bang! Bang!' In the field, the explosion was deafening, black smoke filled the air, and burning sulfur smells attacked everybody's nostrils.

As soon as they shot the thunderbolt bullets, Yu and Yin two people immediately leaped more than ten 'zhang's back, to guard against the successive attacks of Emei Pai. If they were shot again and again, they knew that eventually they would not be able to stand.

There wasn't anyone among the crowd of heroes who was not stunned to see that the thunderbolt bullets were this deadly. They thought that in the present age, other than these two Wudang Pai masters, perhaps not too many people would be able to escape these thunderbolt bullets. Those with superior 'qing gong' might be able to evade, but if the bullets were scattered with 'man tian hua yu' [blossoming rain filling the

sky] technique, several thunderbolt bullets would collide with each other midair, as soon as these bullets exploded, they would not escape alive even if they were able to move faster.

A big and tall man in the Huashan Pai wooden shelter stood up; with a loud voice he said, "Will Emei Pai rely on numbers to achieve victory in this martial art competition?" This man was one of the Huashan Er Lao [two elders], who joined hands with He Taichong, husband and wife, to fight Zhang Wuji at the Brightness Peak.

Jing Jia of Emei Pai replied, "The study martial art has thousands of change and ten thousand of variations. Those who are strong, win. Those who are weak, lose. We are not pedantic intellectuals who always insist that everything should adhere to meticulous principles. Besides, in this world, there are not too many meticulous principles worth talking about."

The crowd of heroes was astonished that although Emei Pai was dominated by women, they were actually persistently unreasonable; surprisingly more so than the men were. When the old master of Huashan was arguing with the women, he did not dare to walk close to the Emei Pai shelter; he stayed at his own shelter and argued from a distant, for fear that in their unparalleled aggressive spirit, the opposite party would shoot their thunderbolt bullets away.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Zhiruo must have married Song Shige against her heart. Wasn't she so kind and loving toward me when we were stranded on that desolate island over the sea? The two of us have pledged our undying love and taken an oath not to fail the other. The words are still ringing in our ears, how can we destroy our own oath? It's all because I have done her wrong. On the day we were about to bow to

the Heaven and the Earth, in the presence of guests filling the wedding hall, I fled with Min Mei. Zhiruo is a Zhangmen of a Sect; she is worth a thousand gold, and I have disgraced her that bad. Is it any wonder that she is that angry and full of resentments toward me? Today the Emei Pai is going against the tide, and it is all because of me."

The more he thought, the more restless he was. Leaving his own wooden shelter, he walked toward the Emei Pai's shelter. "Zhiruo, in everything, I have done you wrong," he said to Zhou Zhiruo, "Song Shige has killed Mo Qishu; ultimately we must resolve this matter. I say, let Song Shige return to Wudang with Yu Erbo and Yin Liushu; let Song Dabo decide on how he has to pay for his crime."

"Zhang Jiaozu," Zhou Zhiruo coldly laughed, "At first I thought you were a real man, only a little bit muddle-headed; to my surprise, turns out that you are a lowly man. A real man will bear the consequences of what he has done. You have killed Mo Qi Xia; why do you put the blame on my husband's head?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "You ... you said I killed Mo Qishu?" he stammered, "I ... how can there be such thing?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "The murder of Mo Qi Xia was arranged under the scheming of the imperial household's Ruyang Junzhu. Why don't you tell her to come out and confront her directly in front of the world's heroes?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Min Mei has offended the Six Major Sects. I am afraid she has more enemies than Yifu. How can I have her make an appearance here? Zhiruo deliberately brought this point up to put Min Mei and me in danger. Ay, a thousand errors, ten thousand blunders, I should have not left her on our wedding day."

Biting his own lower lip, he turned around and walked away. Suddenly someone from the Emei Pai crowd shouted, "I am surprised that Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult is such a despicable coward. Seeing the fierceness of our thunderbolt bullet, he ran away with his tail between his legs."

Zhang Wuji halted his steps, but did not turn his head. "I don't need to see who was talking," he mused, "Whatever insult the Emei Pai people hurl at me, I deserve the punishment."

The jeering and mocking behind him was getting louder, yet Zhang Wuji ignored them all and walked straight to the Ming Cult's wooden shelter.

Yang Xiao let out a cold laugh and said, "The thunderbolt bullet is such an insignificant thing; it's not even worth mentioning. Since it was useless against Wudang's Second Hero, it is also useless against Wudang's direct descendant Zhang Jiaozhu. You, Emei Pai people, are boasting on your special apparatus. Let's see what you can do against our Ming Cult's special apparatus."

As soon as he waved his left hand, a boy dressed in white came forward carrying a small wooden tray on his hands. There were more than a dozen small flags of five different colors inserted on the tray. Yang Xiao grabbed a white flag and tossed it to the center of the field. The flag fell down with its pole sticking out of the ground. The crowd of heroes could see that the flagpole was not even two feet long. The Ming Cult's flaming fire insignia was embroidered on the flag. The crowd wondered what kind of a trick Yang Xiao was playing. At this moment, someone behind Yang Xiao launched a rocket, which flew fast to the sky, and dispersed white smoke in the air.

Footsteps were heard as a team of Ming Cult disciples, with white cloths wrapped around their heads, rushed to the field. There were altogether five hundred men; they all bent their bows and 'Swish! Swish!' Five hundred arrows made a neat circle around the white flag. Then the team arranged themselves in a circle formation. They were the Rui Jin [acute metal] Flag under the command of Wu Jingcao.

The crowd broke into cheers and applause. Each one of the Rui Jin Flag grabbed a javelin from his back. They rushed a dozen of steps forward, and hurled the javelins. Five hundred javelins made a neat fence inside the circle of arrows. Then they rushed another dozen of steps forward, and drew the short hatchets from their waists. The crowd of heroes saw flickering rays of light as five hundred short hatchets whizzed through the air and landed neatly in a circle on the ground. The short hatchets, the javelins and the arrows formed three concentric rings, with no weapon touching another. Even if one's martial art skills were as high as the sky, under these 1,500 long and short weapons' converging attack, one would definitely become minced meat.

The Rui Jin Flag suffered an extremely heavy loss when fought a fierce battle against the Emei Pai in the western region. Even their flag leader, Zhuang Zheng, died under Mijue Shitai's Yitian Sword. Later, learning from this painful experience, they developed this battle formation to destroy even the enemy's strongest defense. During the last several years, the Ming Cult's prestige rapidly rose up; the Five-Element Flags also grew at a tremendous rate. The Rui Jin Flag now had more than twenty thousand men under its banner. This team of five hundred men with javelins, hatchets and arrows was handpicked from among the twenty-thousand members. Their martial art skills were not weak to begin with and after undergoing a rigorous training under

the direction of the masters within the Ming Cult, they became a squadron of fighting force, which could be used to support the Ming Cult army in the battlefield or could be deployed as an elite squad in special assignments.

As they watched this demonstration, the crowd of heroes' faces changed; they thought, 'Wherever Ming Cult's Yang Zuoshi tosses the white flag, these one thousand five hundred weapons will also follow. Although Emei Pai's thunderbolt bullets are fierce, their destroying capability is limited; when they shoot ten bullets, even if each one of them hit the target, they could at most harm only ten people. How can they match the Ming Cult's Rui Jin Flag?' They also thought, "If the Ming Cult suddenly turned hostile and wanted to destroy us, then what? Although the attendees of this great assembly today are all martial art masters, we are actually no more than a mob; certainly we are no match for the refined formation of Rui Jin Flag who are well-trained for a long time and can move together as one unit."

Although their hearts were full of disconcerting thoughts, the crowd of heroes could not help but cheer at the amazing display of the Rui Jin Flag's special skill.

Yang Xiao lifted the white flag in his hand and waved it several times behind his back. The five hundred Rui Jin Flag men pulled out their feathered arrows, javelins and hatchets, walked toward the Ming Cult's wooden shelter, bowed in respect to Zhang Wuji, and then turned around and left the field.

Yang Xiao took a dark green flag and tossed it next to the white flag. Again, heavy footsteps were heard as five hundred Ju Mu [gigantic wood] Flag people, with dark green cloth wrapped around their heads, walked quickly into the field. Every ten men carried a large wooden log. The gigantic

logs weighed around a thousand 'jin' [catty, 1 catty is approximately 0.5kg] each. Each log was fitted with iron hooks. Each man pulled one iron hook. They marched in even steps.

Suddenly they all shouted in one voice and the fifty gigantic logs flew out from their hands. Some flew high, some flew low; some to the left, some to the right; but as each one flew out, it would at least strike another log. All fifty logs and amazingly not a single log was missed. A continuous series of 'Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!' sounds were heard as the fifty logs, divided into twenty-five pairs, struck each other. With fifty logs, each weighed over a thousand catties, struck each other, the momentum was really astonishing. If there were people standing next to the dark green flag, no matter how high they jumped, or evaded to the left and escaped to the right, they would unavoidably be struck by these gigantic logs.

The Ju Mu Flag developed this flying-log formation from military tactics on breaking the defense of a besiege city. The troops would usually utilize wooden logs to ram down the city gate. With logs of this size, even a strong city gate would be struck open. If flesh and blood were subjected to the impact of these big logs, wouldn't they be smashed into pulp?

As these gigantic logs fell back down, the five hundred men caught the iron hooks, and then they turned around and rushed for about a dozen 'zhang' out, waiting for the next order in the shape of another dark green flag, before they tossed the gigantic logs up for the second time.

Yang Xiao waved the dark green flag, ordering the Ju Mu Flag to withdraw. And then his right hand picked a red flag and tossed it to the center of the field.

As the Ming Cult men with dark green headbands withdrew,

five hundred men from Lie Huo [raging inferno] Flag, with red cloth wrapped around their heads, marched into the field. Each man had a spray gun in his hand. As they pumped the gun, they spurted thick and blackish oil to the center of the field. The Lie Huo Flag leader waved his hand to toss a blazing sulfur ball. The oil met the fire and the field was ablaze with wave after wave of raging fire.

The neighboring area of the Ming Cult headquarters on the Brightness Peak was very rich with petroleum. Day and night crude oil spouted out from among the rocks, which would burn as soon as it met with fire. Each one of the Lie Huo Flag men carried an iron tank on his back. Each tank was full of petroleum. With them spraying more oil to the burning fire, nobody would be able to withstand it.

After the Lie Huo Flag withdrew from the field, Yang Xiao tossed a black flag into the field. Five hundred Hong Shui [flooding water] Flag men, with black cloth wrapped around their heads, rushed into the field. These Hong Shui Flag men carried household items. Altogether, there were twenty water hoses, some spray guns and buckets. Ten men at the front pushed ten wooden carts.

The Flag Leader, Tang Yang, shouted his command. The carts opened to release twenty hungry wolves. The wolves made threatening gestures and growled in the field then they charged to the crowd, trying to bite people. The heroes were shocked; they wondered what did these hungry wolves have to do with the words 'flooding water'?

They heard Tang Yang shout his order again "Spray the water!" A hundred men pumped their spray guns and a hundred streams of water were shot at these hungry wolves. The crowd of heroes smelled a peal of acid stench. They saw that as soon as the wolves were hit by the water, they

tumbled down at once, yelping madly and howling miserably. In an instant, their skin split open and their flesh rot, they turned into coal-black piles. It turned out that the water sprayed by the Hong Shui Flag was a deadly poison to dissolve flesh in liquid form. It was concocted from sulfur, potassium nitrate and other chemicals.

Watching this extremely disturbing demonstration, the crowd of heroes could not help but be absolutely horrified; each of them thought, "If this poisonous water was not sprayed to the wolves but were aimed on me, what would happen?"

The Hong Shui Flag carried twenty water hoses with the spray guns. They assumed a standby position, and then squirted the water towards the wolves. Obviously, they carried more poisonous water than what was needed to kill the wolves. If a little more pressure was added, not only the spray would be stronger, it could also reach farther.

Yang Xiao waved the black flag to withdraw the troops. The Hong Shui Flag pulled their water hoses away from the field. As they turned the spray guns around, the heroes who stood in the direction the spray gun was turned at, couldn't restrain their faces from cringing.

Meanwhile, Yang Xiao had tossed a small yellow flag. A group of men wearing yellow headbands marched into the field. Each man carried an iron shovel in his hand and pushed a wheelbarrow full of dirt. Compared to the other four flags, Jin, Mu, Shui, Huo [metal, wood, water and fire], their numbers were a lot smaller; they had only a hundred people in their team.

These hundred men formed a circle around the field. Then they simultaneously started to dig vigorously. Suddenly there was a loud booming noise. The dust rose. The center of the

field collapsed, revealing a large hole, about three, four 'zhang's in diameter. Next, the ground all around the hole was moving, followed by the appearance of men, each wearing a metal helmet on his head and holding an iron shovel in his hand. Four hundred men bored through the surface of the ground. The heroes were greatly shocked and cried out in unison.

Turned out these four hundred men had dug a tunnel from some distant away to the center of the field, where they excavated a large hole underground and supported the ground overhead with planks of wood. They waited, hidden underground, until the Hou Tu [thick earth] Flag Leader, Yan Yuan, gave his command and the four hundred men simultaneously pulled the planks so that the entire layer of ground fell down. Then the Ming Cult people underground emerged to the surface. This way, the wolves' carcasses, oil, scorched earth, everything fell down into the hole below.

The hundred men brandished their iron shovels and struck the air above the holes three times. If there were any people who fell into the hole and wanted to escape by jumping up, they were bound to be struck down by these hundred shovels.

One by one the wheel barrows poured their loads of dirt, black sands and pebbles into the hole. In a short period of time, the big holes, along with hundreds small holes around it, were filled and the ground was level again. The five hundred iron shovels rose and fell continuously, making an attractive scene.

The Flag Leader shouted his command and the five hundred men saluted toward Zhang Wuji. The center of the field was now filled with dirt and sand, as flat and smooth as a mirror, a lot more firm and solid than it was previously.

The crowd of heroes understood. "If I stood at the center of the field and spoke condescendingly against the Ming Cult, I would have been buried under the ground by now."

In a way, this little demonstration had showcased the invincible might of the Ming Cult's Five-Element Flags. There weren't any one among the spectators, from heroes all around the world who was not amazed by it. They were aware that for the last several years, the Ming Cult had staged a rebellion in Huai Si, Henan, Hubei, and other area. They had besieged towns and seized territories; successively defeated Yuan army. This moment they displayed the military skill and tactics they had mastered for the benefit of the gathering of Wulin heroes and warriors. They were large in numbers, organized and followed strict discipline, plus they were highly trained. No Jianghu sect or school under the Heavens would be able to withstand.

After withdrawing the troops, Yang Xiao returned the small flags to the wooden tray, which was then carried back by the young boy. With cold eyes he looked at Zhou Zhiruo. He did not say anything, but his meaning was very clear: 'With only a little more than a hundred male and female Emei disciples, can you match our strong Ming Cult of several thousand?'

Around the field, each of the heroes was immersed in their own thoughts. For a moment, the field was quiet. After a while, the old monk behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "The Ming Cult demonstration of troop movements and military tactics we have witnessed just now looked impressive. However, when all is said and done, whether it can be really used, whether it can really subdue the enemy, we are not military generals; we have not studied the Sun Wu's art of war. I am afraid none of us can really tell ..."

Everybody knew he was speaking contrary to his convictions; it was just that the Ming Cult's prestige was truly awe-inspiring, so he played down the fierceness of the Five-Element Flags.

Zhou Dian called out, "You want to know whether it can be really used? That is very easy. All Shaolin Pai needs to do is send some monks to try and then the result will be apparent."

The old monk pretended not to hear, he continued his speech, "Today is the great assembly of the heroes from all over the world. Every school and every sect's aspirations are to observe and emulate, to compare and deliberate the study of martial art skills. Still, as highlighted by several Shizhu [benefactor] earlier, everybody will compete in martial arts and the one with the highest skill will win. What we are interested in doing is a one on one competition; relying on numbers to achieve victory, is actually an unheard custom in the Wulin world."

Ouyang Muzhi said, "Relying on numbers to achieve victory is an unheard custom in the Wulin world, but what about 'pi li lei huo dan'? This poisonous and malicious trick, is it allowed?"

The old monk was silent for a moment before saying, "If a contestant wants to use secret projectiles, of course it is allowed. If some friends put some poison on their secret projectiles, we have no way of forbidding them. But if somebody launches a sneak attack, he is breaking a major rule of this assembly; then everybody else has the right to attack him together. Gentlemen, what do you think?"

Most of the heroes in attendance gave their consent by applauding loudly. Tang Wenliang of Kongtong Pai said, "I

have one thing I'd like to say: whoever has won two fights in a row must be allowed to take a rest, so that he can restore his internal energy and take a breather. Otherwise, if one is forced to fight a series of capable people, one cannot fight them all in one breath regardless of how high one's skill is. Furthermore, from each school, each sect, each clan and each society, if there are two people already defeated, they must not send anybody to the stage anymore. Otherwise, there are thousands of heroes in here; if for every hero defeated another one takes his place, I am afraid even three months will not be sufficient to accommodate everybody. Although Shaolin Temple has abundant provisions [orig. 'liang2cao3' - food and grass], they will go broke if they have to feed us all; and I doubt if they would recover within a hundred years."

The audience broke out in laughter; they agreed that these two propositions made a lot of sense.

The Ming Cult warriors knew that Tang Wenliang was indebted to Zhang Wuji because he set his broken bone at the Brightness Peak; and then again when he saved him from the Wan An Temple. He was hoping Zhang Wuji would triumph over the opponents. By proposing these two rules to the crowd of heroes, he was helping Zhang Wuji to conserve his energy.

Peng Yingyu said with a smile, "Tang Lao San [Ol' Tang the third] is doing us a favor. It seems like we can count on Kongtong Pai to be on our side today. All right, other than Jiaozhu, who will compete for us?"

All of the Ming Cult masters were eager to try, but they all realized that the battle today was of a very great importance; it was necessary for them to spare no effort. They would have to try to defeat as many opponents as possible, and thus leave as little powerful opponents as possible to their Jiaozhu, so that he could conserve his energy to face the

unexpected. If they only managed to defeat a few people, and then got defeated, not only they would leave a heavy burden for Jiaozhu to bear alone, the damage to their own prestige would not be small, but also the burden to the Cult would be great; Xie Xun and their Cult Leader were too important. Furthermore, if they volunteered rashly, they would inevitably give the impression that after the Cult Leader, their martial art skills were better than everybody else's, and thus they risked damaging the 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty and self sacrifice/code of brotherhood] among the brethren. For these reasons, they were all silent; nobody dared to make any noise.

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "It's not that Zhou Dian is scared of death. It's just that my martial art has not reached perfection. If I volunteer, I would only expose my own disgrace."

Zhang Wuji looked at his subordinates one by one. He thought, "Yang Zuo Shi, Fan You Shi, Wei Fu Wang, Bu Dai Shifu, Tie Guan Daozhang [Taoist priest]; everybody possesses an unsurpassed quality. Any one of them may go. Among them, Fan You Shi's martial art knowledge is the broadest. No matter what school the opponent came from, he has a greater chance to score a victory. I'd better ask Fan You Shi to go into action with me." Thereupon he said, "Actually, any one of the brethren going is the same to me. But Yang Zuo Shi had helped me fighting the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan. Wei Fu Wang and Bu Dai Dashi have just captured Xia Zhou, so they have used up some strength. This time, I am thinking of asking Fan You Shi to come with me."

Fan Yao was delighted. "I accept the order!" he bowed and said, "Many thanks Jiaozhu, for your high regards!"

The Ming Cult warriors all knew that Fan Yao's martial art skill

was superb; nobody raised any objections.

“Fan Dashi,” Zhao Min suddenly said, “I am going to ask you something. Would you be willing to indulge me?”

“Whatever instruction Junzhu has, I will comply,” Fan Yao replied.

Zhao Min said, “Kong Zhi Dashi of Shaolin Pai has not resolved his enmity against you. If you fight him first, victory or defeat between the two of you will be hard to predict. Even if you gain victory, your strength would be depleted.”

Fan Yao nodded. He understood that Kong Zhi Shen Seng had been famous for dozens of years. Kong Zhi’s face looked long as if he was in constant anxiety; he looked like someone who would not reach old age, but actually, his internal and external skills had reached perfection.

Zhao Min said, “There is no harm in making an appointment with him; state it explicitly that you want to fight him one on one at the Wan An Temple in Dadu. One fight to decide victory and defeat.”

“Marvelous plan, marvelous plan!” Yang Xiao and Fan Yao exclaimed. They knew that if Kong Zhi agreed to fight Fan Yao at a later date, then they could not fight today. With her idea, Zhao Min eliminated one powerful enemy to the Ming Cult.

In the mean time, the heroes and warriors of every sect and every school were whispering among themselves in their respective wooden shelters to choose their champions. From several wooden shelters came loud noises of people bickering; apparently, they have some disagreement in the selection process.

Fan Yao went to the host's shelter. He saluted Kong Zhi and said, "Kong Zhi Dashi, I wonder if you have guts? Do you dare to meet me at the Wan An Temple?"

Hearing the word 'Wan An Temple', which was the only disgrace he had ever experienced in his entire life, the lines on Kong Zhi's forehead went even deeper. His thin eyes were gleaming as he asked, "What is it?"

Fan Yao said, "We tied our enmity at Wan An Temple, we must resolve it at Wan An Temple. You, Kong Zhi Dashi, are a man of virtue and prestige. Unfortunately, I also have some insignificant reputation. In today's battle, if you defeated me, Jianghu people would say that a strong dragon cannot repress a snake in its lair; you, a Dashi [great master], take advantage of your home turf. If by luck I gained half a style advantage, ignorant people would add fuel to the fire by saying Ku Toutuo came to Shaolin Temple to overpower Shaolin's number one master. If Dashi is not afraid, I will be asking for Dashi's unsurpassed artistries at the Wan An Temple, in the evening of the full moon, on the Mid-autumn festival of this year [orig. 'ba yue zhong qiu' - 15th day of the eighth month of lunar calendar]."

Actually, Kong Zhi was rather afraid of Fan Yao's martial art. Besides, there was a big change in the Temple right now; he was not in a good mood to fight Fan Yao. Therefore, although he knew Fan Yao was provoking him, he agreed immediately. "Very well, the Mid-autumn festival of this year, we will meet at the Wan An Temple. I will not leave until we meet."

Fan Yao cupped his fists to salute, and then turned around and left. He had just walked for seven, eight paces when he heard Kong Zhi unhurriedly say, "Fan Shizhu [benefactor], you wholeheartedly want to save Jin Mao Shi Wang today.

That's why you do not dare to fight with me. Am I right?"

Fan Yao was startled; he halted his steps while thinking, "This monk sees through our intention after all." Turning his head, he laughed and said, "I don't have the confidence I would defeat you."

Kong Zhi smiled and replied, "Lao Na also do not have the confidence to defeat Shizhu."

The two of them nodded. In that moment, in their hearts grew a fondness toward each other; hero admired another hero, a real man cared for another real man.

End of Chapter 37.

Chapter 38 - A Gentleman is Vulnerable to Deceit

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo's flexible whip coiled back and stormed toward Yin Liting. Yin Liting's Taiji Sword going back and forth, opening and closing, the 'yin' and 'yang' elements intertwined with each other. He was unleashing the instructions given by Zhang Sanfeng to the fullest. While facing a life and death situation, he was able to display the most refined of their school's sword technique.

Gradually, the noise around the field died down. The old monk from Damo Hall who sat behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "We have agreed to the rules set by the heroes to govern our martial art competition today. Saber and spear, fists and legs, do not have eyes. Death will not be discussed further, alive and well will be the Heaven's fate. Whichever school, sect, clan or society has the strongest martial art, will have control over Xie Xun and the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji frowned slightly. He thought, "It seems like this monk is afraid the battle will not be fierce enough, the enmity among schools will not be deep enough. Don't they have mercy as displayed by Shen Seng like Kong Jian and Kong Wen anymore?"

The crowd further agreed that as soon as one had defeated two opponents in a row, one must be given an opportunity to rest. Other than that, there was not much difference than the previously agreed rule.

Immediately some people went down the field and called out their challenges, which were answered at once. A moment later, there were six people fighting in three pairs.

Zhao Min had learned the essence of each unique skill belonging to the Six Major Sects' masters when she detained them in the Wan An Temple. Although her comprehension

was still shallow, her knowledge and experience were not ordinary at all. Standing in between Zhang Wuji and Fan Yao, they discussed the martial arts of those six people. She made predictions on who would win and who would lose. Surprisingly, her analysis was very clear and logical.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later, among the three pairs, two had reached conclusion, and only one pair was still engaged in a fierce battle. Two more people immediately went down the field to challenge the victors. Hence, it was still six people fought in three pairs. The newcomers were using weapons, so their opponents also unsheathed their weapons. As the competition proceeded this way, it was only natural that eight or nine fights out of ten were decided with some shedding of blood.

Zhang Wuji mused, "This way, the friendship between each clan and sect will definitely suffer some damage. As soon as one school defeats another, although nobody loses his life or suffer injury, the loser will unavoidably try to retaliate in the future. I will be greatly surprised if this event will not breed an enormous disaster in which everybody kills each other."

In the meantime, the Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao's palm hacked down on the short elder of Huashan Pai that the latter spurted blood from his mouth. The tall elder of Huashan Pai cursed, "Stinky Beggar! Rotten Beggar!" while jumping out to challenge the Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao.

The short elder quickly grabbed his arm and said in low voice, "Shidi [younger martial brother], you are not his match. We'll have to swallow this defeat for the time being."

The tall elder angrily said, "I don't care, I must fight him!" Although his mouth said those words, deep down in his heart he realized that his Shixiong's [martial brother] martial art

skill was comparable to his own; their energy cultivation was identical. If Shixiong was beaten, then he had no chance of victory. As he was being pulled by his senior, his mouth did not stop shouting abusive words, but his feet actually moved toward their wooden shelter.

After that, Zhi Fa Zhanglao scored another victory over the Sect Leader of the 'Mei Hua Dao' [Plum Blossom Blade]. Since he had defeated two people in a row, amidst the thunderous applause from the Beggar Clan crowd, he returned to their shelter, feeling very pleased with himself.

And thus, one come the other go, the competition in the field had been going on for more than four hours. The red glowing sun was slowly moving to the west. The martial art skill of the people going down into the battle was increasingly higher. At first, a lot of people were having lofty aspirations; their hearts were filled with desire to show off their skills in this general assembly of the world heroes. However after seeing other people's martial art skills, and only then did they realize that they were no more than a frog in the well. Without ascending the Mount Tai, one would not know the vastness of the earth. Therefore, they did not dare to enter the competition.

By the ninth hour (between 3 to 5 pm), the Beggar Clan's Zhang Bo Longtou entered the arena to challenge Peng Siniang [fourth lady Peng] of Xiang Si Pai Jiao [lit. 'Four-Row Cult'(?)] of Hunan province], which he struck until she tumbled down. The clothes on Siniang's back were torn. It was such a big tear that she withdrew from the fight in her embarrassment.

Zhang Bo Longtou turned his eyes toward the Emei Pai people and with a cold laugh said, "What kind of real ability can womenfolk have? If they do not depend on their sharp

weapons, then they would depend on strange secret projectiles. This lady Peng Siniang is able to train to this level, it truly is not easy.”

Zhou Zhiruo spoke in low voice to Song Qingshu. Song Qingshu nodded, and then unhurriedly went down the arena. He cupped his fists to Zhang Bo Longtou and said, “Longtou Dage; let me receive pointers from your masterful strikes.”

Zhang Bo Longtou was furious to see Song Qingshu. “The one surnamed Song,” he angrily shouted, “You are in collusion with that traitor Chen Youliang in penetrating our Beggar Clan. You, the traitor, must have played a part in the death of our Shi Bangzhu. Do you still have a face to see me today?”

Song Qingshu coldly replied, “Penetrating the enemy’s nest and stealing secrets are common occurrences in Jianghu. You only have your own bunch of blind beggars to blame that you failed to see Song Daye’s [‘big master’ Song] true identity.”

Zhang Bo Longtou cursed, “You are capable of betraying your own old man’s Wudang Pai; you are capable of doing anything. You are not being filial to your father, later you will not be faithful to your wife. Emei Pai will certainly meet its destruction in your hands.”

Song Qingshu was so angry that his face turned pale. “Are you done farting?” he said.

Zhang Bo Longtou did not respond. With a loud grunt his palm hacked down. Song Qingshu turned around to evade. His hand lightly swept backhandedly, using Emei Pai’s ‘Jin Ding Mian Zhang’ [lit. golden peak soft/supple palm] to parry the attack.

Zhang Bo Longtou was angry with Song Qingshu for penetrating the Beggar Clan and deceiving them, so his move was intended to kill; it was exceptionally fierce. Unfortunately, his opponent this time was not an ordinary martial artist. Within the Beggar Clan, Zhang Bo Longtou's martial art skill was inferior only to their late Bangzhu, and Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa, two elders. His palm technique had reached an unordinary level.

Song Qingshu was chief among the Wudang Pai's third generation disciples; but after all, his comprehension of Emei Pai's 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' was not deep enough. He had not yet able to unleash the full potential of exquisite and subtle variations within the palm technique. After fighting for about forty, fifty stances, he repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Automatically his 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' turned into Wudang Pai's 'Mian Zhang' [cotton palm]. It was the martial art he was most familiar since his childhood. He had trained it for more than twenty years. He was able to launch this martial art at will; it was very powerful. The outward appearance was similar to Emei Pai's 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang', but the method of transmitting energy to the moves was actually entirely different. The spectators did not know this fact. They only saw Song Qingshu gradually turned the situation over in his favor.

The more he watched, the angrier Yin Liting was. 'Song Qingshu,' he called out, "You, the kid, have no shame at all! You have left Wudang, why do you still use Wudang skill to save your life? You betrayed your father, but why do you use the martial art your father taught you?"

Song Qingshu's face turned red. "What's so special about Wudang Pai's martial art?" he called out, "Look carefully!" Suddenly his left hand turned into a hook in front of Zhang

Bo Longtou's eyes. Revolving to the left and turning to the right, he launched seven, eight different styles. In a surprise movement, his right hand thrust forward and 'stab!' His five fingers pierced Zhang Bo Longtou's forehead.

The spectators were stunned. They only see Song Qingshu's fingers dripping with blood, while Zhang Bo Longtou fell backwards. It was obvious that he was dead.

With a cold laugh Song Qingshu said, "Does Wudang Pai have this kind of martial art?"

The crowd of heroes called out in alarm. Eight people from the Beggar Clan rushed forward. Two quickly grabbed Zhang Bo Longtou's body, while the other six attacked Song Qingshu. These six were Beggar Clan's masters; among them, four were brandishing their weapons, so that in a short moment Song Qingshu was surrounded by dangers.

A big and fat monk behind Reverend Kong Zhi loudly shouted, "The Beggar Clan's gentlemen take advantage of a solitary man; aren't you breaching today's heroes assembly rule?"

Zhi Fa Zhanglao called out, "Brothers, get back. Let me avenge Zhang Bo Longtou."

The Beggar Clan disciples leaped backward. They took Zhang Bo Longtou's body back to their wooden shelter. With angry look on their faces, they stared at Song Qingshu menacingly.

The heroes watching on the side thought, "Although it was agreed that in this martial art competition death is not a big deal, but this surname Song's hands are too heavy and ruthless."

At this moment, Zhang Wuji was recalling the injury on Zhao Min's shoulder, which was from a five-finger claw; and then that night at the thatched hut, the way Du Baidang and Yi Sanniang's corpses lying on the floor. With a trembling voice he asked, "Yang Zuo Shi, where did Emei Pai get this evil martial art from?"

Yang Xiao shook his head. "Subordinate has never seen this kind of martial art," he said, "However, Emei Pai's founder Guo Nuxia was known as 'Xiao Dong Xie' [young eastern heretic] so I wouldn't be surprised if 30% of her martial art skill was heretical."

While the two of them were talking, Song Qingshu has started fighting Zhi Fa Zhanglao. Zhi Fa Zhanglao was a thin and small man, and extremely agile. His ten fingers were like a hook or an awl, attacking Song Qingshu with 'mo zhua gong' [devil claw skill]. It looked like he was very adept in using his fingers, and wanted to poke five holes on top of Song Qingshu's head to avenge Zhang Bo Longtou's death.

At first, Song Qingshu was still using the 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' to parry the opponent. After fighting for a while, Zhi Fa Zhanglao roared, "Little dog thief!" The five fingers of his left hand had already touched Song Qingshu's forehead. Just a little bit more strength, the fingers would have pierced Song Qingshu. Song Qingshu stretched out his right hand, and 'stab!' his five fingers entered Zhi Fa Zhanglao's throat. Zhi Fa Zhanglao fell forward. His left hand had not lost its strength that it penetrated the surface of the earth. Blood spread out on the ground. He stopped breathing at once.

Zhou Zhiruo made a signal with her hand. Eight Emei Pai female disciples, each with a sword in her hand, jumped forward and with two on each side, they stood with their backs facing in, on the front, rear, left and right, around Song

Qingshu. There would be a chaotic battle if the Beggar Clan people rushed forward to attack again.

With a loud and clear voice, one of the old monks of Damo Hall said, "Luohan Hall's thirty-six disciples, obey the order!" His palms clapped three times, thirty six Shaolin monks wearing yellow robes came out. Eighteen of them held Buddhist staves, while the other eighteen brandished sabers. They quickly spread out around the field. They stood in what looked like a formation, yet it was not exactly a formation. However, all strategic places were guarded.

The old monk said, "Receive Kong Zhi Shishu's [martial (younger) uncle] order: the thirty six Luohan Hall disciples are to enforce the great hero assembly's rules. If there are some people who rely on number to bully an individual, they are to be treated as Wulin world's public enemy. We, Shaolin Temple, must not shame ourselves as the host. We must maintain the justice. Thirty six disciples to look carefully; regardless who break the rules, kill him on the spot. Do not show any mercy."

The thirty six disciples loudly voiced their compliance. With ferocious stare they fixed their gaze to the center of the field. With the Emei Pai guarding Song Qingshu, and Shaolin Pai guarding on the side, the Beggar Clan disciples did not dare to make any rash moves even though they were grieved and furious. They only shouted and cursed while taking Zhi Fa Zhanglao's body back to their shelter.

"Ku Dashi," in a low voice Zhao Min said to Fan Yao, "I didn't expect Emei Pai still have this deadly stance. At the Wan An Temple, Mie Jue Shitai would rather die than showing off her martial art. Perhaps this is the reason."

Fan Yao shook his head without saying anything. He was

deep in thought to find a way to break this particular stance. After staring blankly for half a day, he suddenly approached Zhang Wuji.

“Jiaozhu,” he said, “Subordinate wants to consult with you a martial art stance.” With his palms pressed on the table, he stretched out his left hand index finger, and then his right hand index finger, one after another. With an incredible nimbleness he moved the fingers continuously seven times. And then with a low voice said, “My arms will attack successively this way. I only need to coil around this boy’s arm, and exert my internal energy to break his arm joint. With a broken arm, even if his fingers were fiercer, he would not be able to execute his move.”

Zhang Wuji also moved around his fingers on the table. Left hooked, right lifted. “Be careful not to let his fingers pierce your arms,” he said.

Fan Yao nodded his agreement. He said, “I will use ‘qin na shou’ [grab and seize, grappling technique] to grab his wrist, and then ‘shiba lu yuanyang lian huan tui’ [eighteen way/method mandarin ducks chain legs (continuous kicking)] to kick the lower part of his body].”

Zhang Wuji said, “Attack him ferociously with eighty one stances, don’t give him any opportunity to take a breather.” These two people’s four fingers moved backward and forward, attacked and defended with exceptional speed. Fan Yao suddenly smiled, “Jiaozhu’s attacks are too marvelous. I don’t think this boy has this kind of power. His martial art is limited. He won’t be able to unleash the full potential of these several stances.”

Zhang Wuji also showed a faint smile and said, “If he cannot unleash the full potential of these three stances, then Fan

You Shi, you have already won.” His left index finger made two circles, right index fingers suddenly thrust out from within the circles and hooked Fan Yao’s finger. He smiled slightly without saying anything.

Fan Yao was startled. “Many thanks for Jiaozhu’s directions,” he delightedly said, “The admiration of your subordinate reaches the highest level. These four stances are unthinkable. They truly enlightened subordinate’s dark mind. I really wish I could bow to you and take you as my master.”

Zhang Wuji replied, “These are part of Taijiquan technique bestowed to me by my Tai Shifu, the ‘luan huan jue’ [secret of the random circles]. The main point is the circles made by the left hand. Although this man surnamed Song came from Wudang, I don’t think he has mastery over the most refined of these principles.”

With this new idea in his mind, Fan Yao was confident he could defeat Song Qingshu. However, after two streak victories, Song Qingshu was entitled to take a rest according to the competition rules. Therefore, Fan Yao must wait for him to reenter the stage before he could come forward and challenge him.

All this time Zhao Min was standing close to them. With a faint smile on her face, she looks extremely delighted. Zhang Wuji shifted to get closer to her and asked in low voice, “Min Mei, what is it? Why do you look so happy?”

Zhao Min’s jade-like cheeks blushed. Hanging her head low, she whispered, “You taught Fan You Shi these several martial art techniques only to break Song Qingshu’s arm. Why didn’t you teach him something to take the life of that person surnamed Song?”

Zhang Wuji replied, "Although Song Qingshu has done much evil, he is, after all, my Da Shibo's [first martial (older) uncle] only beloved child. It will be up to Da Shibo to discipline him. If I told Fan You Shi to take his life, I would have been unfair to Da Shibo."

Zhao Min said with a laugh, "If you have him killed, Zhou Jia Jiejie [older sister from Zhou family] would become a widow. Then you can rekindle the old flame. Wouldn't that be marvelous?"

Zhang Wuji laughed. "Would you allow me to do that?" he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and replied, "I wouldn't think of not allowing you. I'll just wait till you turn double-minded again [orig. 'san xin liang yi' - three hearts, two intentions], then she'd use her fingers to poke five holes on your chest."

While Zhang Wuji was discussing counterattack measure with Fan Yao, and talking and joking with Zhao Min, Song Qingshu had retreated to his wooden shelter under the protection of the eight Emei female disciples. The crowd of heroes saw how hair-raising and ruthlessly he killed his two opponents just now. They could not help but feeling frightened; they were not willing to go down the arena and thus subjected themselves to the danger.

A moment later, in a leisure manner Song Qingshu returned to the arena. Cupping his fists he said, "I [orig. zai4xia4 - under] have had enough rest. I am ready to take any hero who would like to give me some instructions."

Fan Yao called out, "Let me ask for some advice from Emei Pai's marvelous skill." He was just about to jump into the arena when suddenly a grey shadow flashed by and stopped

right in front of Song Qingshu. He turned toward Fan Yao and said, "Fan Dashi, please let me try first." This person's manner was very dignified. He stood with his feet sturdily grounded. His attitude was guarded. He was the Wudang Er Xia [second hero], Yu Lianzhou.

Seeing that Yu Lianzhou rushed over, and realizing he was Jiaozhu's martial uncle, Fan Yao felt it was inappropriate to argue with him. He said, "The Ol' Fan is lucky today to be able to see Yu Er Xia's Wudang divine skill."

"I do not dare," Yu Lianzhou replied.

Since he was little, Song Qingshu had always a bit scared of this particular Shishu. Right now, seeing him with an imposing aura and stern look, he knew today's battle was no longer a sparring while he was training on Mount Wudang, but it would be a life and death combat. Although he had learned amazing martial art from a different school, he still cowered in the end.

Yu Lianzhou cupped his fists and said, "Song Shaoxia [young hero], please!" This salute, and also the way he addressed Song Qingshu, showed clearly that he did not dare to show the slightest degree of contempt toward Song Qingshu, but also showed that he considered Song Qingshu as a total outsider.

Song Qingshu did not say anything. He simply bowed in respect. Yu Lianzhou shouted and his palm hacked down on Song Qingshu's face.

Yu Lianzhou had been famous in the Wulin world for the last thirty years or so, but the number of people who had actually seen him displaying his true capability was actually very few. Until today, when they saw him with soft power in his palms

he rendered the strong, ruthless, explosive power of the 'pi li lei huo dan' [thunderbolt bullet] useless. His skill was so refined that the spectators felt ashamed of their own inadequacy. The Jianghu people had known for some time that the essence of Wudang Pai's martial art was 'soft subduing hard', the style was slow moving but also very rich with subtle changes. Who would have thought that Yu Lianzhou's palms stormed like the wind, his style was amazingly swift, that Song Qingshu's lower part, between his legs and his waist, was successively hit by a kick and a palm.

Song Qingshu was very shocked. "Tai Shifu and Father both prepared me to be the Wudang Pai's third generation Zhangmen [sect leader], they would not hold any martial art secret from me. Yu Ershu's [second uncle] swift fist and quick leg were in the style I had already learned, but how could he launch the stances with such a speed? Didn't the way he use it is contrary to our school's main principle? Whatever it is, the result is this fierce!"

He wanted to use the finger skill Zhou Zhiruo taught him, but Yu Lianzhou did not give him even a chance to catch his breath. Thereupon he had no choice but kept stepping back and did his best to hold his position.

The crowd of heroes watched the fight between these two men with rapt attention. Presently, Yu Lianzhou was gaining an upper hand. However, in the two previous battles, Song Qingshu was also at a disadvantage before he was able to turn defeat into victory by stretching out his fingers and killing his opponents. He might be able to repeat it this time. They saw Yu Lianzhou moved faster and faster, but every style and every stance was very clear. It was just like an expert singer, although the singer sang a fast-tempo song, the enunciation of every syllable was very clear, without the slightest degree of fuzziness.

The crowd of heroes started to stand up one by one. Those who sat on the back climbed the tables and chairs. In their hearts, they were all praising, "Wudang's Yu Er Xia truly deserves his reputation. He does not stop pressing his opponent, yet not a single stance was used twice."

Lucky for Song Qingshu that he was a direct-line disciple of Wudang; he knew all the subtle changes of Yu Lianzhou's hands and feet movements. However, fighting in such a pace was actually the first time for him.

The yellow dust on the field rose upward, becoming a thick fog enveloping these two men. Suddenly there was a loud bang as two palms collided. Both Yu Lianzhou and Song Qingshu leaped backward at the same time. The cloud of dust was divided. Before he was even standing firmly, with a monkey-like agility Yu Lianzhou had jumped forward again.

Yin Liting was concerned over his Shixiong's safety. He could not help standing by the field with his hand on the hilt of his sword and his unblinking eyes trained on the battle in the field.

By now, Song Qingshu felt as if he was treading on the fine line between life and death. He fought with everything he had. He did not even think of using other school's martial art any longer; all he could use was Wudang Pai martial art, which he trained since his childhood.

Yin Liting was very familiar with these two men's punching and kicking style; he knew that each stance was meant to take the opponent's life. Hence, his anxiety far surpassed of those who were merely spectators. Fortunately, he noticed that Yu Lianzhou gradually gained the upper hand. He would have hacked him dead early on if he did not guard against

Song Qingshu's malicious and ruthless five-finger piercing stance, hence being somewhat cautious.

Zhang Wuji was also quite worried. Secretly he grabbed two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his pocket. If Yu Lianzhou's life will be in danger, he would disregard the general assembly's rule by dashing out and save him.

The cloud of dust was growing higher. Suddenly Song Qingshu stretched out his left hand with his five fingers spread out to claw Yu Lianzhou's right shoulder. For the last hundred stances or so, Yu Lianzhou had been waiting for Song Qingshu to launch this stance.

Yu Lianzhou had clearly seen the way Song Qingshu used his claw to kill the two elders of the Beggar Clan. If there were no previous fatal example, Yu Lianzhou would have been taken by surprise by this kind of fierce and killer stance. Although he might not die, but he would certainly be seriously injured. However, since he had seen this stance, he had prepared beforehand how to deal with it. On the other hand, Song Qingshu had not practiced this claw technique long enough; his movement did not have too many variations. His movement this time was almost the same to the previous ones.

Yu Lianzhou made a slight shoulder movement to evade. His left hand made several circles in the air.

"Ah!" Zhao Min and Fan Yao could not bear not to exclaim together, because Yu Lianzhou's circles were exactly the 'luan huan jue' of Taijiquan Zhang Wuji taught Fan Yao earlier.

As Zhao Min and Fan Yao watched this, they knew Song Qingshu was in a very bad moment. Before their 'ah!'

exclaim was even finished, the five fingers of Song Qingshu's right hand had arrived at Yu Lianzhou's throat.

Zhang Wuji was enraged. "He deserves to die! He deserves to die!" he muttered under his breath. The Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao lost his life under this claw. Unexpectedly Song Qingshu was brazen enough to use this malicious hand toward his own martial uncle.

But he saw that one of Yu Lianzhou's arms made a circle, while the other arm revolved in the 'zuan fan' [drilling/boring movement] and 'luo xuan' [corkscrew turn] stances from the 'liu he jin' [six gathering strengths] style. Yu Lianzhou's arms coiled around Song Qingshu's arms. 'Crack! Crack!' Song Qingshu's arm joints broke.

"Qidi [seventh (younger) brother] is avenged today!" Yu Lianzhou roared.

Joining his arms together, Yu Lianzhou continued striking both of Song Qingshu's ears with the 'shuang feng guan er' [a pair of wind piercing the ears]. It was an attack where the 'soft' power was focused into one target. Song Qingshu's skull disintegrated immediately. But before his body even fell to the ground, Yu Lianzhou gave him a powerful kick. Obviously, he wanted to finish Song Qingshu on the spot.

Suddenly a dark green shadow flashed by; a long whip threatened Yu Lianzhou's face. Hastily he leaped back to evade. But with an unimaginable speed the long whip kept threatening his face. It was none other than the Emei Pai's Sect Leader seeking revenge for her husband.

Yu Lianzhou hurriedly took three steps backward. Zhou Zhiruo's whip technique was truly out of this world; in just three stances Yu Lianzhou was surrounded by the whip. Suddenly the flexible whip shook and coiled back. Zhou

Zhiruo caught the tip of the whip with her left hand and coldly said, "If I take your life right now, you will be dissatisfied. Unsheathe your weapon!"

'Shua!' Yin Liting drew his sword out. He stepped forward and said, "Let me receive Miss Zhou's instruction."

Zhou Zhiruo stared at him with cold eyes; she turned around to look at Song Qingshu's injury. His eyes were closed, blood flowed out from his seven orifices, he laid down on the ground, paralyzed. It looked like his life could not be saved. Three male disciples from Emei Pai rushed forward and took him back to their shelter.

Zhou Zhiruo turned back and pointed at Yu Lianzhou and said, "I'll kill you first. Killing the one surnamed Yin later will not be too late."

Yu Lianzhou had exhausted his entire strength just now yet he was unable to escape from her whip's encirclement. He was inwardly shocked. He loved his younger martial brother. He thought, "If I fight her, even though I might die under her whip, at least Liudi [sixth (younger) brother] would have a chance to see her whip technique. My only hope is that his chance of survival will be increased by several points."

Reaching behind his back, he wanted to take over Yin Liting's sword. Yin Liting also realized the mortal danger they were facing. Even with the two martial brothers' level of martial art skills, the chance of them escaping her long whip's strike seemed very remote. Both he and his Shixiong had the same intention; he also wanted to fight her first, so that Shixiong would have a chance to find the gist of her whip technique. Thereupon, he was unwilling to hand his sword over.

"Shige [martial (older) brother]," he said, "Let me have a go

first.”

Yu Lianzhou turned his gaze to him. They had been training in the same school for dozens of years. They had a very close relationship with each other; as close as blood brothers. That moment, deep emotion surged up his breast; his thought flashed back and forth like lightning. He remembered Yu Daiyan was crippled, Zhang Cuishan killed himself, Mo Shenggu died a tragic death. From the Wudang Seven Heroes, only four left. It seemed like two more heroes would lost their lives in this place. Although Yin Liudi was strong in martial art, emotionally he was very weak. If he died first, Yin Liudi’s mind would take such a blow that he might be unable to fight an all out battle.

“If I died first,” he carefully considered, “Liudi would have to go through countless difficulties to avenge me, while he himself would not want to escape alive alone. In the end, the two of us, martial brothers, would unavoidably die together in vain. If he died first, I would have a chance to understand the essence of this woman’s whip technique, and then perhaps I could fight her with all I have and die together with her.” Thereupon he nodded and said, “Liudi, try to hold your ground as long as possible.”

Remembering his pregnant wife, Yang Buhui, Yin Liting could not help but taking a glance toward Yang Xiao and Zhang Wuji. But immediately he rebuked himself, “After I die, other people will certainly take a good care of Buhui and the child; why would I act like a weak woman by asking others to help?” Thereupon he raised his sword, his eyes focused on the sword, his mind cleared of other matters, his back straightened, his chest puffed out, his shoulder relaxed and his elbows hang loosely.

“Zhang Men Ren [sect leader], please grant your

instructions!" he said. Although he was a lot older than Zhou Zhiruo, at this moment, Zhou Zhiruo was the Sect Leader of Emei Pai. He did not want to show the least bit of disrespect.

Noticing that Yin Liting was using the 'Taijijian' [Taiji Sword] to face the opponent; Yu Lianzhou knew that his sixth brother was prepared to unleash the full potential of their school's most powerful skill to contend with the most powerful enemy. He slowly retreated from the arena.

"You may start!" Zhou Zhiruo said.

Yin Liting thought that the opponent's movement was lightning fast. If he let her took the initiative, he might never be able to regain his momentum. Thereupon as his left foot took a step, he switched the sword to his left hand, and launched the 'san huan tao yue' [three rings around the moon]. This first stance was a mixture of truth and deceit; the sword in his left hand lunged toward the enemy, the blade flickered with rays of light, 'swish, swish, swish', the sword produced light swishing noise. The crowd of heroes broke into an earth-shattering applause.

Zhou Zhiruo turned her body sideways to evade; Yin Liting followed with 'da kui xing' [the Great Bear Constellation] and 'yan zi chao shui' [swallow hunts over the water]. His sword drew a big circle in the air, his right hand pierced straight forward, surprisingly, it also carried light 'swish, swish, swish' noise.

Zhou Zhiruo swung her slender waist like a pendulum, dodging the attacks one by one. "Yin Liu Xia," she said, "I gave you three stances to repay your kindness on Mount Wudang in the old days." As the last word came out of her mouth, the flexible whip in her hand shook like a cobra and struck directly into Yin Liting's chest.

Yin Liting quickly evaded to the left; but the whip changed its course midway and curved toward him. Yin Liting countered with 'feng bai he ye' [the wind sweeps lotus leaves]. His sword pared down. The whip and the sword collided, creating a light scratching noise. Yin Liting felt a burning sensation on the palm of his hand; the sword nearly fell off.

He was greatly shocked. "I thought her stances were strange but her internal energy was in par with mine," he mused, "Who would have thought that her internal energy is also strange beyond measures." Refocusing his attention, he launched the Taiji Sword by creating random circles, generating an extremely tight defense around his body.

The flexible whip in Zhou Zhiruo's hand was like a string of soft silk thread, like a weightless object. Her body flashed to the east and to the west, dashed forward and backward, yet the whip was always fluttering around Yin Liting.

Zhang Wuji's amazement grew as he watched the battle. "The way she moves the whip is entirely different from Du E, Du Nan and Du Jie, three eminent monks." At first, he thought that Emei Pai still had some heretical martial art that he was unaware of, but as he watched she move with demon-like agility, which differed greatly from Mie Jue Shitai's movements, against his will, a vague feeling of fear crept into his heart.

Suddenly Fan Yao exclaimed, "She is a ghost, she is not a human!"

His words echoed what was in Zhang Wuji's mind that he shivered involuntarily. If he were not in the field where the sun was still shining brightly and people were standing all

around him he would have thought that Zhou Zhiruo had died and her ghost picked up a whip and fought with Yin Liting.

In all his life, he had seen countless of strange martial arts, but Zhou Zhiruo's footwork and whip technique, which was like the wind blowing willow branch, or the water floating duckweed, was truly beyond anybody's imagination. In that moment, he felt as if he was awakened from a nightmare and was shivering from fear, "Could it be that she practices some kind of demonic skill? Or she is being possessed by some monster?"

Zhou Zhiruo's movements were strange, but Taiji Sword was developed from Zhang Sanfeng's Taijiquan [Taiji fist], which he created in his later years. It was the pinnacle of the sword technique, which came from the culmination of his life-long comprehension of martial art theory. Yin Liting unleashed his entire strength and skill into his continuous sword movements. Although he was unable to injure the opponent, his defense was flawless, enough to hold his ground.

Suddenly, someone called out with a strange voice and strange intonation, "Aiyo! Song Qingshu is about to breathe his last. Zhou Da Zhangmen [great sect leader], if you don't pay your last respect to your husband, you will be considered a dishonorable widow!"

Everybody turned their eyes toward the voice. It was Zhou Dian. He knew that in their entire lives, Wudang disciples put great emphasis to the internal energy cultivation to control their breathing. In facing the enemy, they were like 'the Mount Tai collapsed in front of their eyes, their countenances would not change; an elk hit their left ears, their eyes did not blink.' So he intended to help Yin Liting by disrupting Zhou Zhiruo's attention.

“Hey, hey, Miss Zhou Zhiruo of the Emei Pai,” he called again, “Your husband is about to die, he has some last words for you. He says he has three times seven, twenty-one, and four times seven, twenty-eight, illegitimate children outside. He wants that after he dies, you will take a good care of them, so that he won’t die with open eyes. Will you or will you not consent to his request?”

As the crowd of heroes heard him blabber such nonsense, some of them could not help but snicker. But Zhou Zhiruo acted as if she did not hear anything.

“Aiyo,” Zhou Dian called out, “It’s too bad! Miejue Lao Shitai, how have you, Senior, been doing? Long time no see. You, Senior, has never looked better. Your spirit must have possessed Miss Zhou; the way she plays this flexible whip is indeed very attractive!”

Suddenly, Zhou Zhiruo’s shadow flashed several ‘zhang’s backward. She lashed her long whip over her right shoulder. The tip of the whip curved up from the ground toward Zhou Dian’s face. Initially she was more than a dozen ‘zhang’s away from the Ming Cult’s thatched shelter, but just like a dragon swooping down from the sky, the flexible whip suddenly arrived at his face like an arrow.

Zhou Dian was happily blabbering with spittle coming out of his mouth. He did not expect in the middle of a fierce battle, Zhou Zhiruo was able to launch a sudden attack with her whip. As he was stunned, the long whip had already arrived at his face. Zhou Zhiruo did not even turn her head, but it was as if the back of her head grew a pair of eyes; the tip of the whip was pointing right at his nose.

As Zhou Zhiruo flung the long whip backward, two of her left-

hand fingers repeatedly pierced toward Yin Liting. Within seven of such attacks, she had covered the entire vital acupoints on Yin Liting's head, face and the front of his chest.

Yin Liting was unable to attack the opponent. He also could not turn back his sword to pare her arm. With no other choice, he launched the 'feng dian tou' [nodding phoenix] by bending his knees to dodge the attacks.

In the meantime, from the Ming Cult's thatched shelter came a loud 'bang!' followed by a series of crashing noises. Turned out Yang Xiao, who was standing on the side, and had keen eyes and quick hands, hurled the wooden table in front of him to block Zhou Zhiruo's whip. As the whip struck the table, wooden splinters flew all over the place. The teapots and teacups on the table were also thrown to all directions, splashing hot tea to numerous people around them.

As her attack missed, Zhou Zhiruo no longer paid Zhou Dian any attention. Her flexible whip coiled back and stormed toward Yin Liting.

Holding the hilt of a sword in his hand, Yu Lianzhou had been standing on the side. But after watching for half an afternoon, he still could not predict the essence of her whip technique. "Even if I have to fight, in Taiji Sword technique I am not any better than Liudi [sixth younger brother]. But if the fight is prolonged, this woman's internal energy might be insufficient, and then relying on our resilience, we might score a victory."

He saw Yin Liting's sword going back and forth, opening and closing, the 'yin' and 'yang' elements intertwined with each other. Yin Liting was unleashing the instructions given by their benevolent master, Zhang Sanfeng to the fullest. He thought that in all his life he had never seen his Shidi

[younger martial brother] unleash this kind of brilliant swordsmanship. Today, while facing a life and death situation, he was able to display the most refined of their school's sword technique. Wudang Pai's martial art paid particular attention to resiliency; the longer the fight, the stronger they were. The longer they were able to hold their ground, the greater the chance they would not get defeated.

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo's long whip vibrated, creating circles, big and small circles, surrounding Yin Liting's entire body with these circles. Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword also based on transmitting strength through circles. Surprisingly, Zhou Zhiruo's long whip was also vibrating strength through circles. The rotational direction of the whip and Yin Liting's sword were the same, but the whip was several times faster.

As Yin Liting's sword was entangled by her whip, it lost its strength and did not want to follow its master's command. The sword was swirled several times and then a blue ray flickered as the sword was thrown upward. Zhou Zhiruo's long whip coiled down to smash the crown of Yin Liting's head.

Yu Lianzhou immediately jumped forward. His right hand caught the tip of the flexible whip. From inside her gown, Zhou Zhiruo's leg flew out, threatening Yu Lianzhou's waist.

From the start, Yu Lianzhou had always had difficulty predicting the direction of Zhou Zhiruo's whip strange movements. However, when he saw her shook the whip to create the circles and snatch Yin Liting's sword, it suddenly it dawned on him, "Turns out her skill is only mediocre. Her technique in vibrating the whip to make circles is far inferior to our Taiji Fist."

As he grabbed the tip of the whip, ignoring the attack toward

his waist, his left hand struck Zhou Zhiruo's lower abdomen using the 'hu zhua jue hu shou' ['Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill' - See Chapter 10, translated by Faerie Queenie].

Zhou Zhiruo was unable to block. Like a lightning, this thought came into her mind, "I'll die under Yu Er Shu's [second (younger) uncle] hands today." Releasing the whip handle, the five fingers of her right hand came down on top of Yu Lianzhou's head, hoping that in her death, she would take Yu Lianzhou along.

Yu Lianzhou wanted to lean his head sideways to evade, but unfortunately, the 'tui hou xue' [lit. 'behind the leg' acupoint] on his waist was sealed by Zhou Zhiruo's kick that his neck stiffened and he could not turn his head. However, the strength of his left hand did not diminish.

At the time when both people's lives were hanging by a thread, someone suddenly darted in from the side; his right hand blocked Yu Lianzhou's 'hu zhua jue hu shou', his left hand stopped Zhou Zhiruo's fingers, which were about to pierce Yu Lianzhou's skull. It was Zhang Wuji who decided to save them.

Zhou Zhiruo combined the forces of her palms to strike Zhang Wuji's chest. If Zhang Wuji dodged the attack, this pair of palms would strike Yin Liting's face, therefore, he had no choice but parry her palms with his left palm.

As these two people's three palms struck each other, Zhang Wuji suddenly felt that Zhou Zhiruo's palms were void of any strength. Zhang Wuji was stunned. "Aiyo, not good!" he thought, "After fighting ferociously with Liu Shu [sixth uncle] for more than 200 stances, she is like a lamp which oil has dried up. If I continued sending out my strength, she would

certainly die on the spot.” In desperation, he hastily pulled back his strength.

When he sent out his left palm, he only knew that Zhou Zhiruo’s martial art did not differ too much from his own, that she was a powerful opponent; therefore, he did not dare to be negligent. With one palm blocking two, he had sent his entire strength. As the force was just about to come out, he realized the opponent was devoid of any strength, so he hurriedly pulled back his power. He was well aware that by doing so, he had violated an important principle of the martial art theory. It was equal to attacking his own body with his entire strength. In addition, he needed to use more strength in order to pull back the outgoing power. Fortunately, he had reached a level where he could send out or pull back his power at will. This sudden withdrawal of his strength would only stop the flow of his ‘chi’ momentarily, but would not greatly harm him.

Unexpectedly, as he pulled his strength, he suddenly felt like a burst of flooding water breaking a dam, the opponent’s strength surged into his body with an irresistible force. Zhang Wuji was greatly shocked; realizing that he had fallen into the enemy’s trap. ‘Bang!’ his chest was squarely hit by Zhou Zhiruo’s palms.

Zhang Wuji was stricken by his own strength plus Zhou Zhiruo’s palm power. It was as if two martial art masters joined hands to attack him. Although his Jiu Yang Shen Gong protecting his body was profound, it was simply too much for him to bear. Much less, the power of Zhou Zhiruo’s palms seized the opportunity to burst in when his defense line was wide open; right when his previous strength was pulled back and before the new strength was generated.

This technique was actually Emei Pai’s specialty. In the past,

Miejue Shitai had used it to strike him until he spurted blood and fell down to the ground. It was just that in the past, he was completely ignorant on how to withstand the attack. This time however, he misread Zhou Zhiruo's intentions and thus had fallen under the deceit.

Zhang Wuji was thrown backwards. His vision blackened and he spurted a mouthful of blood.

As Zhou Zhiruo's sneak attack succeeded, her left hand followed with five fingers aimed at the pit of his stomach. Zhang Wuji was heavily injured, but he had not lost consciousness. Seeing the claw was about to rip his throat and chest open, he strained himself to inch backward some more. 'Rip!' Zhou Zhiruo's claw scratched the front part of his clothes open, revealing Zhang Wuji's bare chest. Zhou Zhiruo's right hand claw swiftly followed.

At this moment, Yu Lianzhou's acupoint was sealed by her kick so he was unable to move. Yin Liting was some distance away so even though he pounced forward, he would be too late to save him. It looked like Zhang Wuji would not be able to escape this calamity.

As she was glancing down, Zhou Zhiruo suddenly saw a deep scar on his chest. It was the scar when she stabbed him with the Yitian Sword at the Brightness Peak. Her five fingers were less than half a foot from his chest, but mixed emotions suddenly surged up in her breast. Her eyes turned red and her claw stopped midair.

While she was hesitating, Wei Yixiao, Yin Liting, Yang Xiao, and Fan Yao, four people had already arrived. Wei Yixiao flew and blocked in front of Zhang Wuji. Yang and Fan, two people launched a converging attack from left and right. Yin Liting quickly grabbed Zhang Wuji and took him away.

The crowd around the field was thrown into chaos. Emei Pai disciples and Shaolin monks shouted and grabbing their weapons, they rushed into the arena. Yang Xiao and Fan Yao only fought Zhou Zhiruo for several stances before they stopped. Wei Yixiao helped up Yu Lianzhou, taking him back to their shelter. Emei Pai and Shaolin Pai also returned to their positions as they saw that the fight has ceased.

Zhao Min was actually also rushing into the arena, but her speed was inferior to that of Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, and the others. By the time she was halfway, Zhang Wuji was already carried back. As she saw blood seeping out from his mouth, she was so frightened that her face turned sheet-white.

Forcing a smile, Zhang Wuji said, "I am all right. I only need to circulate my 'chi' for a while."

Everybody helped him to sit in the shelter. At once Zhang Wuji slowly circulated his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to treat his internal injury.

Zhou Zhiruo called out, "Which hero will come up to grant me instruction?" Tightening his belt, Fan Yao went out in big strides.

"Fan You Shi," Zhang Wuji quickly called out, "Listen to my order: you must not fight. We ... we admit defeat ..." As he opened his mouth, he vomited two more mouthful of blood.

Fan Yao did not dare to defy his Jiaozhu's order. Supposing he insisted on fighting, he would inevitably make Zhang Wuji's injury worse. Besides, even if he fought with everything he had, he might only deliver his life in vain, without any advantage to their own Cult.

Standing in the middle of the field, Zhou Zhiruo asked two more times.

The fact that Zhang Wuji was injured by his own pulled-back strength was known to him and Zhou Zhiruo only. Others believed that Zhou Zhiruo's power was so strange that Zhang Wuji was not her match. The spectators only saw that Zhou Zhiruo did not continue her claw and thus they believed that she spared Zhang Wuji's life. As a young woman, she successfully defeated Yin Liting, Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Wuji; three prominent martial art masters of this age. Everybody believed that her martial art was simply too strange; totally beyond anybody's comprehension.

Although there were more than a handful warriors among the crowd of heroes who were quite skillful in martial arts, upon self-introspection, these people realized they could not be compared to Yin, Yu and Zhang, three people; therefore, they decided there was no need for them to lose their lives for nothing.

Standing in the field, Zhou Zhiruo's gown was blown by the mountain breeze, giving the impression that her gentle and frail figure was swaying by the wind. All around the field there were several thousand heroes and warriors from all over the world [orig. 'san shan wu yue, si mian ba fang' - three hills and five mountains, four faces and eight directions. Five sacred mountains of the Taoism are: Tai Shan, Hua Shan, Heng Shan, Heng Shan (different characters) and Song Shan.], yet not a single one dared to come down and challenge her.

Zhou Zhiruo waited a while longer, still nobody stepped forward. The old monk from Damo Hall walked into the field. Joining his palms together he said, "The skill of Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren [sect leader], Mrs. Song surpasses the crowd

of heroes. Her martial art skill is number one in the world. Is there any hero who disagrees?"

Zhou Dian called out, "I, Zhou Dian, disagree."

"In that case," the old monk said, "I invite Zhou Yingxiong [hero Zhou] to come down and have a competition with her."

"I am not her match," Zhou Dian replied, "What can I compete with her?"

"Zhou Yingxiong," the old monk replied, "Since you are aware you are not her match, aren't you submitting to her?"

"I know that I am not her match," Zhou Dian said, "But I do not submit to her. What's wrong with that?"

The old monk no longer argued with his twisted logic. He asked, "Aside from this gentleman, Zhou Yingxiong, is there anybody else who do not submit to her?"

He repeated the question three times. Zhou Dian also voiced his disagreement three times. But nobody else made any noise to challenge the decision.

"Since nobody is going to challenge her," the old monk said, "Then according to the prior agreement of this great assembly, Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun will be handed over to Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren, Mrs. Song. Whoever has the precious Tulong Saber in his possession should also hand over the control of the said Saber to Mrs. Song. This is the agreement reached by the heroes present and nobody will be allowed to dissent."

Zhang Wuji was in the middle of treating his heavy injury by dispersing his internal energy and activating his Jiu Yang

Zhen Qi. He was slowly entering the 'clear' and 'void' state of mind. But as he suddenly heard the old monk say 'Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun will be handed over to Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren, Mrs. Song', his mind was shaken and he nearly threw up another mouthful of blood.

Zhao Min was sitting close to him, caring for him with complete attention. Seeing Zhang Wuji suddenly shiver and his face greatly change, she understood his concern.

"Wuji Gege," she said in a soft voice, "Nothing could be better than that Yifu falling into Zhou Jiejie's hands. She did not have a heart to kill you just now; obviously, she still has deep feelings for you. I am sure she will not harm Yifu. Please set your heart at ease and just concentrate on treating your injury."

Zhang Wuji thought she was right. He was relieved.

In the meantime, the sun was slowly setting behind the western mountain. The field gradually turned dark. The old monk said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun is confined somewhere in the back of the mountain. Right now, the sky has turned dark, Gentlemen and Ladies must be hungry. We will gather here again tomorrow afternoon. Lao Seng [old monk, referring to himself] will lead Mrs. Song to release the prisoner. That time we will witness Mrs. Song's unparalleled martial art skill once again."

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, and the others cast their glances toward Zhao Min. They all thought, "Exactly as you predicted. Shaolin Pai indeed has another plot. Even if Zhou Zhiruo possessed stronger martial art skill, there is no way she would be able to defeat Du E and the others, three eminent monks. I am afraid she would lose her life on top of that small hill. By showing off their power, Shaolin Pai will still dominate

over the Wulin world.”

By this time Zhou Zhiruo had already returned to her thatched shelter. By defeating the heroes that day, Emei Pai's prestige soared high. Seeing their Sect Leader return, there was not a single Emei disciple who did not show profound respect.

Although the crowd of heroes had seen Zhou Zhiruo win the title 'Number One Martial Artist under the Heavens', the most important matter had not been brought to completion yet, its conclusion was still left to everybody's guess. Therefore, nobody went down the mountain that day.

The old monk said, “By visiting our Temple, all heroes are Shaolin Pai's esteemed guests. If there is any resentment in your midst, we respectfully request for our sake that you do not settle it up on the Shaoshi Mountain. Otherwise, we will consider you as looking down on Shaolin Pai. After dinner tonight, you may visit the front part of the mountain as you wish. The rear part of the mountain, however, is where our Sect keeps our scriptures and manuals. We ask you to stay away from that part.”

Immediately Fan Yao took Zhang Wuji and carried him back to the Ming Cult camp. Although Zhang Wuji's injury was very heavy, after taking nine of his own 'miracle pills' plus circulating his Jiu Yang Shen Qi, deep into the night, around the second hour [between 1 - 3am], he vomited three mouthfuls of blood and his internal injury was completely healed.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were pleasantly surprised. They all praised his internal energy cultivation as unparalleled in the world. If someone else suffered such a heavy injury, even if he was under a

master physician's care, he would need at least one or two months before he could comfortably circulate his 'chi' again. The fact that Zhang Wuji was able to recuperate in a matter of hours was simply too incredible. It would be hard for them to believe if they did not witness it with their own eyes.

Zhang Wuji ate two bowls of rice. After resting for a moment, he stood up and said, "I need to get some air."

He was the Cult Leader. Even though he did not tell them what he was going to do, nobody dared to inquire. Yin Liting only said, "You have just recovered from a serious injury; you must be very careful."

"I will!" Zhang Wuji replied. Noticing a great concern on Zhao Min's face, he gave her a faint smile as if he was saying, "Don't worry!"

As Zhang Wuji walked out the shed and looked up, he saw the bright moon and sparse stars in the sky. He took a deep breath and felt that his 'zhen qi' [real/genuine 'chi'] was flowing freely around his body. His spirit rose as he walked toward the Temple gate.

"I [orig. zai4xia4 - 'under'] have something I'd like to discuss with Emei Pai Zhang Men [sect leader]; would you please show me the way?" he said to the monk in charge of the reception of the visitors.

The monk on duty knew he was the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. "Yes! Yes!" he said, full of respect, "Xiao Seng [humble monk - referring to self] will show the way. Zhang Jiaozhu, this way, please."

Leading Zhang Wuji to the west, they walked for approximately a 'li' [0.5km] before he pointed toward several

little huts some distance away.

The monk said, "Emei Pai stays over there. Monks and nuns are not supposed to mingle. Xiao Seng feels uncomfortable to get too close this late at night." Actually, he was afraid Zhang Wuji might fight with Zhou Zhiruo again. If two masters of the present age involved in a battle, he might get unlucky and would be hurt as an innocent bystander.

With a smile Zhang Wuji said, "If you returned and mentioned this matter, you would unavoidably alarm the others. I'd better seal your acupoint. What do you say?"

The monk hastily said, "Xiao Seng will not dare to open my mouth. Jiaozhu, don't worry." Hurriedly he turned around and left.

Zhang Wuji strolled leisurely toward the huts. He stopped about a dozen of 'zhang's away from the huts. Two nuns immediately flew in. Holding their swords horizontally across their bodies they shouted, "Who's there?"

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji wishes to have an audience with your precious Sect's Sect Leader, Mrs. Song."

The two nuns were very apprehensive; the more senior of the two haltingly said, "Zhang ... Zhang Jiaozhu, please wait here, I ... I have to report it first." Although she tried to act calm, her voice trembled. She turned around and started to walk. But only several steps later she took out a bamboo whistle and blew it.

Emei Pai was very happy and proud that day. Their Sect Leader had defeated three of the great masters of the present age in front of the world heroes. She had scared the several thousand fierce warriors so that none dared to

challenge her. That was indeed an unprecedented grand occasion in the history of their Sect. However, the Emei Pai had killed two Elders of the Beggar Clan, defeated two heroes of Wudang, and injured the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. The number of people they had offended today was truly not a few. In addition, with Zhou Zhiruo winning the 'Number One Martial Artist in the World' title, there would be many heroes who were angry or envious. Thus, that night they set up tight sentries and patrols around their camp to guard against any threat from the outside.

As the nun blew the whistle, more than twenty people rushed in immediately from all directions. Their blades flickered under the moonlight. Zhang Wuji ignored their presence. He stood still with his hands behind his back.

The nun disappeared into a small hut. She reappeared a moment later and said, "Our humble Sect's Zhang Men Ren says: Men and women are not supposed to mingle, especially this late at night. Zhang Jiaozhu, please return."

"I have a rather acceptable medical skill," Zhang Wuji said, "I only wish to treat Song Qingshu Shaoxia's [young hero] injury; nothing more."

The nun was startled. She went back into the hut to convey the message. After a long time, she returned and said, "Zhang Men Ren invites you to come in."

Zhang Wuji patted his waist to show that he did not carry any weapon before walking behind the nun to enter the hut. He saw Zhou Zhiruo sitting by a table on the side; her cheek rested on her palm. She was lost in thought so that she did not turn her head although she heard him. The nun poured a cup of green tea and set it on the table then she retreated and gently closed the door. There were no other people in the

room. A flickering white candle on the table illuminated Zhou Zhiruo's plain dark green attire. The overall scene was sad and gloomy.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. In a low voice he said, "How is Song Shige's condition? Let me take a look at him."

Without turning her head, Zhou Zhiruo coldly said, "His skull is smashed, his injury is very heavy. Most likely he won't survive. I don't even know if he would survive the night."

"You know my medical skill is not too bad," Zhang Wuji said, "I will do my best to save him."

"Why do you want to save him?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji was startled. "I did you wrong," he said, "In my heart, I am very ashamed. Moreover, you have showed me mercy today by letting me live. Song Shige is injured; I want to make it up to you somehow."

"You showed me mercy first, do you think I did not know it?" Zhou Zhiruo replied, "If you can bring Song Dage back to life, how do you want me to repay?"

"A life for a life," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am asking you to show mercy on my Yifu."

Pointing toward the inner chamber Zhou Zhiruo indifferently said, "He is inside."

Zhang Wuji walked toward the inside chamber. But as he saw the room was pitch-black without any light, he took the candlestick and went in. Zhou Zhiruo did not move; she was still sitting motionless with her cheek on her palm.

Zhang Wuji raised the dark green mosquito net up. Under the candlelight, he saw that Song Qingshu's eyes were bulging, his facial features [orig. 'wu3guan1' - five sensory organs: nose, eyes, lips, tongue, ears] were distorted, making his countenance hideous. His breathing was very weak and he had lost consciousness long ago. Zhang Wuji held his wrist only to find his pulse was chaotic; sometimes fast, sometimes slow. His skin felt ice-cold. If he was not treated immediately, indeed he would not survive the night. Zhang Wuji lightly touched his skull and felt that four pieces of Song Qingshu's skull, the forehead and the back of his head, were disintegrated. Zhang Wuji thought about the fierceness of his Yu Er Bo's [second (older) uncle] pair of fists. This 'shuang feng guan er' stance was backed by a hundred percent internal energy. If Song Qingshu did not have a very strong foundation in internal energy cultivation, he would have died on the spot.

Zhang Wuji let down the mosquito net. He put down the candlestick on the table, sat on a bamboo chair by the table, and was deep in thought, thinking how he was going to treat the injury. Song Qingshu's injury was fatal; even with all his might, Zhang Wuji's confidence only reached 30%.

It took him about the time to cook rice to consider all options carefully; and then he stood up and went out the room. "Mrs. Song," he said, "Whether or not Song Shige's life would be saved, I find it very difficult to assert. Would you let me give it a try?"

"If you can't save him, nobody else in this world can," Zhou Zhiruo answered.

Zhang Wuji said, "Even if his life is spared, I am afraid his face, his martial art will not return to his former days. His brain was also shaken badly. I am afraid ... I am afraid even

speaking will not be easy for him.”

“You are not a deity,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “I know you will do your utmost to bring him back to life, so that you can be the imperial court’s consort with a clear conscience.”

Zhang Wuji was stumped; he thought it was inappropriate for him to respond, so he simply went back to the inner chamber and uncovered the quilt covering Song Qingshu’s body. After sealing Song Qingshu’s eight major acupoints, with an extreme care and very light pressure, which was neither here nor there, his ten fingers started to mend Song Qingshu’s broken skull, piece by piece. And then he took out a golden case from his bosom. With his little finger he picked a bead of blackish paste, which he then rubbed evenly with both hands on Song Qingshu’s broken skull.

This black paste was the ‘hei yu duan xu gao’ [black jade bone mending ointment], which was the supreme panacea of broken bones, developed by the Shaolin Pai of the Western Region. It was what remained from the ointment he begged from Zhao Min to treat Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting’s broken limbs. He also sent out his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in steady stream through his palm to help the medicine penetrate Song Qingshu’s broken bones.

About the time needed to burn an incense stick later, Zhang Wuji had finished applying his energy. Seeing Song Qingshu’s face did not worsen, he was delighted; knowing that his chance of saving Song Qingshu’s life had been increased by several points.

He had just recovered from a heavy injury so that after exerting that much energy, his heart was beating faster and his breath was labored. After standing next to the bed while regulating his ‘chi’ for half a day, he walked back to the outer

chamber and put the candlestick back on the table.

Under the flickering candlelight, he saw Zhou Zhiruo's face was unusually pale. Hearing light footsteps outside the room, he knew that the Emei disciples were still patrolling around their camp.

"I think Song Shige will live. Set your heart at ease," he said.

"You don't have the confidence of saving his life, I also don't have the confidence of saving Xie Daxia's life," Zhou Zhiruo said.

"She is going to attack the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan tomorrow," Zhang Wuji thought, "Even if there is one or two masters within the Emei Pai to give her a hand, nine out of ten it would be difficult for her to succeed. Perhaps she might deliver her life instead." Thereupon he said, "Do you know the situation of the place where they hold Yifu captive?"

"I don't," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "What kind of fierce ambush Shaolin Pai is preparing?"

And thus Zhang Wuji explained briefly how Xie Xun was held prisoner in a dungeon on top of a small hill, and that he was guarded by Shaolin's three old monks; how he himself had failed to break the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan twice, resulted in the death of Yin Tianzheng.

Zhou Zhiruo was listening quietly until he was finished, and then she said, "That being the case, if you failed to break their defense, what hope do I have?"

Suddenly Zhang Wuji got an idea. "Zhiruo," he happily said, "If the two of us join hands, we can accomplish greater merits. With my pure 'yang' and 'hard' power, I can entangle

the three eminent monks' long whips. With your 'yin' and 'soft' power, you seize the opportunity to enter. Once you are inside the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan defense line, with converging attack from outside and inside, we could score a victory."

With a cold laugh Zhou Zhiruo said, "We were once engaged to each other. Right now, my husband is hovering between life and death. On top of that, I did not take your life today. Other people would say that I still have a feeling toward you. If I took your advice by asking you to help me, the heroes of the world would scold me as one without any sense of honor, indecisive and capricious."

Zhang Wuji anxiously said, "We only need to have clear conscience. Why would we give any regard to whatever other people might say?"

"And if I do have a guilty conscience?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback; he could only say, "You ... You ..."

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "You are a single man and I am a widow. With us being together this late of night, it's hard for us to avoid public criticism. Please leave immediately!"

Zhang Wuji stood up and bowed deeply. "Mrs. Song," he said, "You have been very good to me since we were very young. I wish you would bestow kindness to me one more time. For the rest of his life, Zhang Wuji will not dare to forget your kindness."

Zhou Zhiruo met his request with silence; she neither agreed nor disagreed. All along, she did not even turn her head so that Zhang Wuji was unable to see her expression. While he

was just about to repeat his request, in a loud voice Zhou Zhiruo called, "Jinghui Shijie [martial (older) sister], see the visitor out!"

With a creaking noise, the outer door opened. Jinghui stood outside with a sword in her hand. She stared at Zhang Wuji with an angry look.

Zhang Wuji thought that at this moment, his Yifu's life was at stake; his own reputation was of no importance. Thereupon, he knelt down in front of Zhou Zhiruo and kowtowed four times. "Mrs. Song," he said, "I am asking for your mercy."

Zhou Zhiruo sat motionless like a statue.

"Zhang Wuji," Jinghui shouted, "Zhang Men Ren [sect leader] told you to get out. Why are you still pestering her? You are indeed a scum of the Wulin community. There is no one this shameless!" She thought that Song Qingshu had died and thus Zhang Wuji was begging Zhou Zhiruo to marry him.

Zhang Wuji sighed and jumped out the door.

Before even reaching the Ming Cult camp, Zhao Min had already met him. "Song Qingshu's life is saved, isn't it?" she said, "And you have used my 'hei yu duan xu gao' to be a good man."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "You truly have a deity's foresight. At this time, it's still hard to say whether he will be alive or not."

Zhao Min heaved a deep sigh and said, "You wanted to save Song Qingshu's life as an exchange for Xie Daxia. Wuji Gege, you are growing more and more muddleheaded; you do not have the least bit of understanding of other people's hearts."

“Why?” Zhang Wuji wondered, “I don’t understand what you were saying.”

“You saved Song Qingshu with all your strength, your blood, your sweat. That means you did not care about Zhou Jiejie’s feeling to you the least bit,” Zhao Min said, “Tell me, do you think she is or she isn’t angry?”

Zhang Wuji was startled; he was at a loss for words. He thought it would defy any logic if Zhou Zhiruo did not want her husband to be healed. However, she did say, ‘I know you will do your utmost to bring him back to life, so that you can be the imperial court’s consort with a clear conscience’. Clearly, this sentence carried the idea that Zhou Zhiruo resented him. Moreover, she also said, ‘what if I do have a guilty conscience?’

“You have saved Song Qingshu’s life, and now you regret it, don’t you?” Zhao Min asked. Without waiting for Zhang Wuji’s answer, she smiled slightly and then flew back into the shed.

Zhang Wuji sat on a large rock. He raised his head to look at the cold crescent moon, and was lost in thought. His mind wandered back to the events that followed the first time he met Zhou Ziruo, especially her tone of speaking and her body language just now. He lowered his head, while myriads of indiscernible thoughts raced back and forth in his mind.

Early morning on the sixth day of the fifth month, the bells inside the Shaolin Temple rang, calling the crowd of heroes to gather again in the field. This time, the old monk of the Damo Hall did not even ask for Kong Zhi’s permission. He stood in the middle of the field and said in a loud and clear voice, “All heroes, greetings! In the martial art competition

yesterday, the Emei Pai Sect Leader, Mrs. Song's skill was proven to surpass everybody else's. We invite Mrs. Song to the back of the mountain to break the guard and get Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun out. Lao Seng [old monk - referring to self] will show the way." Finished speaking, he proceeded walking toward the back of the mountain.

Emei Pai's eight senior female disciples promptly followed him, with Zhou Zhiruo and the rest of Emei disciples close on their heels. The rest of the heroes followed after them. Zhang Wuji noticed that Zhou Zhiruo wore similar clothes to the ones she wore the previous day, not mourning clothes, so he knew Song Qingshu had not died yet.

"Critical moment has passed," Zhang Wuji thought, "He will live."

As the crowd of heroes went up to the peak of the hill, they saw that the three eminent monks were still sitting cross-legged under the pine trees.

The old monk of the Damo Hall said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang is held captive in the underground dungeon in between the three green pine trees. Guarding the dungeon are our Sect's three elders. Mrs. Song's martial art skill is unrivalled under the heavens. She only needs to defeat our Sect's three elders then she can open the dungeon and take the prisoner away. The rest of us will have the opportunity to admire Mrs. Song's skill once again."

Seeing Zhang Wuji's indeterminate expression, Yang Xiao said quietly by his ear, "Jiaozhu, don't worry. Wei Fu Wang and Shuo Bude are leading the Five-Element Banners to surround the peak. If Emei Pai is unwilling to hand Xie Shi Wang over, we will have to use force."

Frowning, Zhang Wuji said, "That means we are breaking the

general assembly's rules and breaking good faith."

"I am only afraid Mrs. Song would place a sword on Xie Shi Wang's neck," Yang Xiao said, "And then many innocent bystanders would be hurt. Breaking good faith or not, we simply can't deal with this crowd alone."

Zhao Min quietly said, "Xie Shi Wang's enemies are numerous. We must guard against sneak attacks, someone launching secret projectile from among the crowd."

Yang Xiao said, "Fan You Shi, Priest Tie Guan, Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou] Peng Dashi [reverend Peng], four people are taking their positions on the four corners, guarding against sneak attacks."

In a low voice Zhao Min said, "It would be better if someone launched a secret projectile. We may seize the opportunity amidst the chaos to snatch Xie Shi Wang. The world heroes could not blame us for breaking good faith. However, if all is quiet ... something has to happen ... Hmm, Yang Zuo Shi, have someone in disguise secretly launch an attack toward Xie Shi Wang to stir up the water, and then in the midst of trouble we snatch him away."

Yang Xiao laughed. "This is a wonderful idea," he said, and then immediately left to find someone to execute the plan.

Zhang Wuji realized they were not being straightforward and upright; but in order to save his Yifu, they were left with no other choice but to act decisively. In his heart, he could not stop feeling grateful toward Zhao Min. He thought, "In the face of critical situation, Min Mei and Yang Zuo Shi both have the ability to act decisive. It is very seldom that they had to stop and discuss matters at length, and lose a good opportunity. I don't have that ability."

In the meantime, he heard that Zhou Zhiruo was saying, "Since the three eminent monks are Shaolin Pai's elders, your martial art skill must be very profound. If I fought you with one against three, not only it will be unfair, it will also be disrespectful of me."

The Damo Hall's old monk said, "If Mrs. Song must have one or two people to help, you may do so."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Because all the heroes under the heavens yielded to me, I was fortunate to win the competition. I was using our Sect's special skill, secretly passed on by Xian Shi [late/departed master], Miejue Shitai. Supposing we fought three against three, even if we scored a victory, I would fail to display the instructions my Xian Shi painstakingly taught me. But if I fought one against three, I would show disrespect toward the host. Therefore, let us do this: I am going to call someone who was injured under my hands yesterday, whose injury has not completely recovered, a kid to lend me a hand. This kid was once struck by my Xian Shi three times that he spurted blood. Let all the heroes under the heavens know. That way, my Xian Shi's prestige will not be damaged."

As Zhang Wuji heard this, he was utterly delighted. "Thanks the Heaven and thanks the Earth! She indeed allows me to come forward."

"Zhang Wuji," he heard Zhou Zhiruo call out, "Come out."

Aside from Yang Xiao and a few other people, the Ming Cult warriors did not know the background story; but all of them were angry to hear Zhou Zhiruo saying 'this kid this' and 'this kid that' in total disrespect of their Cult Leader. To their surprise, however, they saw that Zhang Wuji looked so happy. He stepped forward, bowed with cupped fists and

said, "Many thanks Mrs. Song, for showing mercy and sparing this kid's life yesterday."

Zhang Wuji had already decided in his heart, "She is humiliating me publicly not only to gain face to the Emei Pai, but also to retaliate for the disgrace that day, when the groom fled in the middle of the wedding ceremony. For Yifu's sake, I must set aside everything else."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "You were heavily injured that you vomited some blood yesterday. I don't really need any help today, but we must show some manners."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I will follow your orders, I will not dare to disobey."

Zhou Zhiruo took out her whip. As she shook her right hand, the whip immediately created more than a dozen big and small circles in the air. It was a very beautiful sight. Her left hand flipped over. A blue ray flashed. A short blade appeared in her hand. The crowd of heroes had seen the formidable power of her flexible whip yesterday; they did not expect that she was able to use a blade at the same time. One long, the other short, one flexible, the other stiff; these two weapons were exact opposite of each other. The crowd of heroes gasped in admiration; their spirits were aroused.

Zhang Wuji fetched a couple of Sheng Huo Ling tablets from his pocket. He took two steps forward. Suddenly he staggered and deliberately let out several coughs, as if he had not fully recovered and was having difficulty even to protect himself, so that if they defeat the three Shaolin monks, the crowd of heroes would think that all credits belong to Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhou Zhiruo came near to him and said in a low voice, "You

have sworn an oath to avenge your 'biaomei' [younger maternal female cousin]. But if the murderer who harmed her was your Yifu, do you still want to save him?"

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. "Yifu suffers from some mental illness, he cannot be held responsible for his own actions," he finally said.

Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu come here to grant some more instructions today."

"I beg the forgiveness of the three Eminent Monks," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Well said, well said!" Du E said, "This Emei Pai Zhang Men; I heard she defeated all heroes under the heavens yesterday. Could it be that her martial art is superior to Zhang Jiaozhu's?"

"Certainly," Zhang Wuji replied, "Wan bei [younger generation - referring to self] suffered a severe injury and I vomited blood under Zhou Zhang Men's hands yesterday."

"That's strange," Du Nan said.

The three old monks' long whip slowly shook and came out. Right at this moment, from the waist of the hill suddenly came a gentle sound of 'qin' [zither] and flute ensemble, intermingled with the cry of the birds.

Zhang Wuji was very happy. As the 'yao qin' [jade or mother-of-pearl zither] made three 'zheng, zheng, zheng' noise, four young woman wearing white clothes floating onto the peak, each one had a short zither in her hands. Next, amidst the rising and falling flute sound, four young women in black, each blowing a long flute, walked up the peak. The black and white intermingled, eight young women stood on eight

directions. The zither and flute ensemble played a gentle, yet elegant music.

Accompanied by this beautiful music, a beautiful woman draped in light yellow soft cotton clothing strolled leisurely toward the peak. She was the woman Zhang Wuji met during the Beggar Clan meeting at Lulong the other day.

As soon as the little girl, the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, Shi Hongshi saw her, she rushed forward, threw herself in that woman's bosom and cried out, "Yang Jiejie, Yang Jijie! Our Zhanglao and Longtou have been killed!" She pointed toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, "They were killed under Emei Pai and Shaolin Pai's malicious hands."

The woman in yellow nodded and said, "I know. Humph! Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua is not necessarily the strongest martial art in the world."

Ever since she arrived at the peak, her entourage, her beautiful face and her elegant manners have captivated the attention of everybody present. These few words of her were clearly heard by everyone. The crowd of heroes was astonished. The older ones among them thought, "Could it be that Emei Pai's claw technique is the sinister and ruthless skill, 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua', which shook the Jianghu over a hundred years ago?" They had heard the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua's name, and they knew this martial art was evil and brutal to the extreme; but since it had been lost for a long time, nobody had ever seen it.

The woman in yellow took Shi Hongshi by the hand and led her back to the Beggar Clan crowd. Then she sat on a piece of mountain rock.

Zhou Zhiruo's countenance slightly changed as in a low

voice she asked, "Who is this woman?"

"I only met her once," Zhang Wuji replied, "I don't know her name, I don't know her origin; I only know she has some relation with the Beggar Clan."

"Humph!" Zhou Zhiruo snorted, and then said, "Let's start!" Her long whip shook and coiled toward Du Nan's long rope, while grasping this opportunity to occupy the space in between the three deep green pine trees. Her first move in attacking the center of the enemies was very ruthless and swift, with lots of guts; even first-class Jianghu masters might be unable to do what she did.

The crowd of heroes only saw her shadow in the air, just like a giant dark green crane sweeping down from the sky; her movements were incomparably graceful.

The flexible whip in her right hand entangled Du Nan's long rope. Both of them exerted their strength trying to pull their respective weapons that Du Nan's weapon was rendered useless temporarily. Du E and Du Jie's pair of whips made a converging attack from left and right.

Zhang Wuji immediately stepped forward, but his step faltered and he tumbled down to the ground. The crowd of heroes gasped; they thought that after his injury, Zhang Wuji's steps were weakened. They did not know that Zhang Wuji was using the ancient Persian martial art he learned from the Sheng Huo Ling tablets. His movements were weird, totally unpredictable. As he seemed to be falling forward, the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands actually struck toward the pit of Du Nan's stomach.

Du Nan's long rope was still entangled by Zhou Zhiruo's whip that he was unable to use his weapon to block the attack. Du E and Du Jie saw the danger. Their ropes left Zhou Zhiruo to

assault Zhang Wuji. Two long strips of black ropes, with overwhelming power swiftly struck toward Zhang Wuji like a pair of black dragons so that he would be hard pressed to block. Who would have thought that Zhang Wuji rolled around on the ground to escape the attack while rolling toward Du E.

Du E thrust his left hand toward Zhang Wuji's shoulder. Zhang Wuji parried with his left palm using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. His body shook and his shoulder bumped toward Du Jie. He resolutely wanted to make Zhou Zhiruo famous today by giving up the credit of defeating the Shaolin three eminent monks entirely to Emei Pai Zhang Men. His only wish was that he would be able to save Xie Xun. By using the ancient Persian martial art, he rolled and circled to the east, and stumbled and turned to the west. His movements were totally unattractive; he seemed to be in a very distressing situation.

There were many outstandingly experienced warriors with vast knowledge among the spectators, but this special ancient Persian martial art was simply too strange. In addition, there had never been anybody from the Central Plains using it. Much less, the fact that Zhang Wuji was heavily injured the previous day was a public knowledge. Consequently, no one realized that he was only pretending. There wasn't any one among the enemies of the Ming Cult who was not secretly delighted, while all the friends of the Ming Cult were deeply troubled; thinking that Zhang Wuji might lose his life over this matter today.

Over several dozens of stances later, they saw that Zhou Zhiruo's shadow abruptly flashed up and down, swiftly swaying in an unpredictable manner. In the meantime, Zhang Wuji seemed to be losing his ground. His hands and feet moved in a frantic manner, not any better than a fool

who had just started training martial arts. However, no matter how dangerous his situation was, he always managed to escape the opponent's fatal blow at the last moment.

The experienced heroes among the crowd started to realize that Zhang Wuji must have followed some type of footwork; perhaps something similar to 'zui ba xian' [drunken eight immortals], where the movements seemed disorderly, but actually contained strange and subtle variations within it. This type of martial art skill was much more difficult to master than the orthodox martial art commonly practiced in that era.

If this ancient Persian martial art were used to fight one of the three eminent monks, regardless of which monk, he would certainly be confused and put at a disadvantage; just as Zhang Wuji was battered and exhausted when he was dealing with the Wind and Cloud Emissaries for the first time. However, these three Shaolin eminent monks had been in meditation together for several decades; their minds were interlinked. As soon as one of the monks showed a small opening in his defense line, the other two monks would immediately close that gap.

Zhang Wuji executed all kinds of strange movements. Each one was designed to confuse enemy's vision. He would move to the left, but actually attack to the right; he seemed to attack to the front, but actually aim to the back; his movements were very difficult to predict. However, the three monks' whips were as steady as their heartbeat, totally immune to his tricks.

Toward the seventieth, eightieth stance, Zhang Wuji's strange movements continuously emerged one after another, but all along he failed to harm even a strand of these three monks' hair. After nearly a hundred stances, he felt the three

monks' whips were getting stronger, while his own movements were getting sluggish; he was unable to move as quick as when they started fighting. He did not realize that the martial art he used was somewhat demonic, while the three monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was based on Buddhism power utilization technique to subdue evil spirit.

The spectators only saw as if he was fighting with renewed vigor, while actually it was because the demonic influence in his mind was growing stronger. If he fought for another hundred stances, unavoidably he would completely fall under the control of the three monks' Buddhist influence and would continuously dance crazily beyond his control. Without any attack from the three eminent monks, he would condemn himself to his doom.

The common people called the Ming Cult as the Devil Cult not without any reason. This ancient Persian martial art was developed by 'the Old Man of the Mountain', the big devil that killed without batting his eyes. When Zhang Wuji first trained this martial art, he was unconscious of this demonic character; however, now that he was battling formidable opponents, he had to bring out the essence of this demonic martial art to its fullest potential, and thus his mind was gradually stimulated.

Suddenly he looked up to the sky and let out a hysterical and devilish 'ha, ha, ha' laughter. As he stopped laughing, from inside the dungeon among the three green pine trees came a voice; it was his Yifu, Xie Xun's voice. Zhang Wuji heard Xie Xun's old voice slowly recite the 'Jin Gang Jing' [Vajracchedika Sutra or Diamond Sutra], "Upon the occasion of hearing this Discourse Subhuti had an interior realization of its meaning and was moved to tears. Whereupon he addressed the Buddha thus: It is a most precious thing, World-honored One, that you should deliver this supremely

profound Discourse. Never have I heard such an exposition since of old my eye of wisdom first opened. World-honored One, if anyone listens to this Discourse in faith with a pure, lucid mind, he will thereupon conceive an idea of Fundamental Reality ..." [Translator's note: I was about to give up translating this passage, fortunately, I found the English translation by A.F. Price, <http://personal.palouse.net/lotus/diamondsutra.htm> The passage Xie Xun recited was from Section XIV.]

Zhang Wuji was listening and fighting at the same time. As Xie Xun's chanting rose up, he felt that he was able to resist the power of the whips of the three Shaolin monks. He heard Xie Xun continue, "World-honored One, having listened to this Discourse, I receive and retain it with faith and understanding. This is not difficult for me, but in ages to come - in the last five-hundred years, if there be men coming to hear this Discourse who receive and retain it with faith and understanding, they will be persons of most remarkable achievement. Wherefore? Because they will be free from the idea of an ego-entity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, and free from the idea of a separated individuality..."

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji's heart became troubled. He knew that as his Yifu was being imprisoned in the dungeon on this peak, he listened to the three Shaolin eminent monks reciting the sutra every day. He was definitely able to escape the other day, but realizing he had committed grave offenses in the past, he was adamantly not willing to leave. Could it be that after listening to the teachings of Buddha for several months, he finally had a change of heart? The sutra said, 'in ages to come - in the last five-hundred years, if there be men coming to hear this Discourse who receive and retain it with faith and understanding.' At this moment, in Yifu's heart, the 'latter

man of the five-hundred years' must be a reference to Zhang Wuji. Only, the meaning of the scripture was very deep; Zhang Wuji was in the middle of a heated battle, he could not stop to ponder. Naturally, he did not know that Subhuti was an elder who listened to Sakyamuni Buddha's discourse of the Diamond Sutra. Therefore, his understanding of what Xie Xun was reciting was next to nothing.

He heard Xie Xun continue, "Buddha said to Subhuti: Just as you say! If anyone listens to this Discourse and is neither filled with alarm nor awe nor dread, be it known that such a one is of remarkable achievement ... When the Rajah of Kalinga mutilated my body, I was at that time free from the idea of an ego-entity, a personality, a being, and a separated individuality. Wherefore? Because then when my limbs were cut away piece by piece, had I been bound by the aforesaid distinctions, feelings of anger and hatred would have been aroused in me ... Bodhisattvas should leave behind all phenomenal distinctions."

Zhang Wuji understood this passage of scripture. It was clear that everything in this world was illusionary. In regard to my own body, my life, my mind, everything was temporal. Even if others cut my flesh into pieces, I simply need to disregard my own body, naturally all hatred and resentments would vanish. "Yifu lives in a dungeon, yet he seems to be at peace. Could it be that he has reached the realm of freedom from shock, intimidation, and fear?" As he pondered about this, he had another thought, "Is Yifu trying to tell me not to agonize over his well-being? That I don't have to exert myself in rescuing him?"

Xie Xun had been imprisoned in the dungeon for several months. Every evening he heard the three monks in the pine trees reciting the 'Diamond Sutra'. He was slowly enlightened by the meaning of the scripture. This time, as he heard

Zhang Wuji's devilish laughter, he realized the demonic influence was already growing in his heart; Zhang Wuji gradually entered into a dangerous situation. Immediately Xie Xun recited the 'Diamond Sutra' with the hope of driving the demonic influence out of Zhang Wuji's heart.

While listening to the Buddhist scripture, Zhang Wuji's hands did not stop moving. In his heart, he pondered upon the meaning of the text he was hearing. The demonic influence in his heart gradually diminished. Consequently, his ancient Persian martial art lost its effectiveness.

'Swish!' Du Jie's long rope struck toward his left shoulder. Zhang Wuji shrank his shoulder to dodge. Without realizing it, he was using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, supported by his Jiu Yang Shen Gong. At once he was able to neutralize the power of the incoming attack. His mind was moved, "It's hard for me to score a victory using this ancient Persian martial art."

Casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo, Zhang Wuji saw that she was struggling just to hold her ground, to the point that she was in the brink of defeat. He thought, "Today's business is difficult to be resolved in a manner that will satisfy both sides." I can forget about saving Yifu, if I don't go all out and Zhiruo is defeated." Letting out a clear whistle, he used the Sheng Huo Ling tablets to attack bit by bit.

Meanwhile, Xie Xun did not stop reciting the sutra, but Zhang Wuji focused his entire attention on the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi so he closed his ears to the chanting. He tried to take the three monks' long ropes as much as possible with the hope of Zhou Zhiruo finding an opening so that she might enter the circle.

As Zhang Wuji fought with all his might, the three monks felt the pressure on their ropes was gradually getting heavier

that they were forced to increase their internal energies to resist it. The three monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was based on 'Jin Gang Jing's [Diamond Sutra] highest essence; namely, it aimed to achieve the realm of 'free from the idea of an ego-entity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, and free from the idea of a separated individuality'. There was no difference between me and you, no separation of life and death, completely regarded everything as illusory. Only, although the three monks' cultivation was high, as they fought, they were still unable to overcome the desire to win. Although they had disregarded life and death, their human ego had not disappeared. Therefore, the power of their 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' could not reach its pinnacle.

Among the three monks, Du E's cultivation was the highest that he had gotten rid of the 'four freedoms from individuality'. However, the other two monks, Du Nan and Du Jie were still burning with the desire to achieve victory. This mixture of different inner desires had taken its toll in that Du E's long whip movements did not seamlessly match with those of his two colleagues.

The crowd of heroes watching from the side had seen the changes in Zhang Wuji's martial art. The battle in the middle of the green pine trees were growing in intensity. Thin mist started to rise from the top of the three monks' heads. The spectators knew the mist came from the perspiration on the monks' foreheads, which was turned into vapor by the heat generated from the exertion of their internal energy. It was clear that these five people had reached the stage of all out internal energy battle. Thin mist also appeared on top of Zhang Wuji's head. But the mist rose like a long, thin straight line; it did not disperse like regular steam. Obviously, his internal energy cultivation was very deep, deeper than the three monks'. Just the previous day the crowd of heroes saw

that he had received a severe injury. Who would have thought that he completely recovered in only one night? The depth of his internal energy really amazed others.

Zhou Zhiruo, on the other hand, did not dare to engage the three monks in direct confrontation; she only wandered outside the circle. As soon as the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan revealed a crack in their defense line, she would jump in the opportunity. But as one of the whips intercepted her, her graceful figure would lithely turn back to evade. Because of this, the difference in martial art cultivation between Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo became apparent to the spectators. Many among the crowd of heroes could not restrain from voicing their opinions in whispers.

“For the last several years there is a rumor in the Wulin world that the Ming Cult’s Zhang Jiaozhu’s martial art skill is without equal. Sure enough, his reputation is well-deserved. Apparently, he was deliberately yielding to this Mrs. Song yesterday. It is called a gentleman will not fight a woman.”

“What do you mean a gentleman will not fight a woman? Don’t you know Mrs. Song was about to become Zhang Jiaozhu’s wife? It is called ‘old ruler’s affection is deep’!”
[Translator’s note: I know it sounds weird in English, but perhaps someone will explain this saying for us?]

“Pei! It is ‘old sword’s affection is deep’, not ‘old ruler’s affection is deep’!”

“Don’t you see those two iron rulers in Zhang Jiaozhu’s hands?”

“After that, Mrs. Song did not have a heart to kill Zhang Jiaozhu with a vicious blow. Won’t it be ‘the old hand’s affection is deep’?”

Meanwhile, the stances launched by the three monks and Zhang Wuji were getting slower; the changes were also getting more subtle.

Zhou Zhiruo's martial art skill grew at a fantastical rate; her victory over Wudang's Second Hero was the peak of her achievement. However, speaking about internal energy cultivation, compared to Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting, she actually fell far behind. This moment, Zhang Wuji's battle with the three Shaolin monks had reached an all-out, real-skill stage; there was no leeway for a shortcut, no opening for Zhou Zhiruo to attack. Now and then her flexible whip would sweep and strike forward, but as soon as it bumped into the four people's internal energy, it would bounce back immediately.

Less than an hour later, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji's body flowed out rapidly. The Sheng Huo Ling in his hands created 'swish, swish, swish' noise. Originally, the three monks' countenances were different from each other, but at this time their faces were dark red, their Buddhist robes bubbled up as if they were blown by a strong gale. On the other hand, there were not any visible changes in Zhang Wuji's clothes. His superiority had been established by this fact alone. If he fought them one-on-one, or even one-on-two, he would have scored a victory early on.

Zhang Wuji's cultivation of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was immeasurably deep to begin with. After receiving instructions from Zhang Sanfeng, he further developed his 'chi' with cultivation technique of Taijiquan. Right now, the longer he fought, the stronger he was. He would win an endurance race, since he could fight an all-out battle for one or two 'sichen' [1 sichen = 2 hours] more, waiting for the opponents to exhaust their own strength.

The three Shaolin also realized that a prolonged battle would be detrimental to their side. Suddenly they let out a high-pitched shout together. Three long whips rotated rapidly, the whips turned into blur shadows that it was difficult to see which one was real and which one was a mere shadow.

Zhang Wuji focused his gaze on the incoming whip; he blocked them one by one, while anxiety started to grow in his heart. "Although Zhiruo's martial art is marvelous, her days of training were, after all, not too many. Our joint power cannot be compared to [maternal] grandfather and Yang Zuo Zhi. I can't do it based on my strength alone. It looks like we are going to be defeated again today. If I can't save Yifu this time, what do I do?" As his heart was anxious, his internal energy was somewhat reduced. The three monks seized this opportunity to press on; their attacks grew more dangerous, surrounding Zhang Wuji from all sides.

Suddenly, like a flash of lightning a thought came into Zhang Wuji's mind. He recalled Xie Xun's affection toward him when he was little on the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island. He also remembered although Xie Xun was blind, he braved the danger by re-entering the Jianghu, all because of him. If he could not save him today, he definitely did not want to live alone.

He saw that Du Nan's long whip was threatening his back. Disregarding his own safety, his left hand reached up to let the whip strike his arm, but he dissipated the incoming force using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. The Sheng Huo Ling tablet in his right hand blocked the pair of whips of Du E and Du Jie. Like a giant bird he suddenly pounced to the left, but his body turned around midair and suddenly he grabbed Du Nan's long whip, and wound it once around the trunk of the green pine tree in which Du Nan was sitting.

This maneuver was truly unthinkable; Zhang Wuji raised his left arm, pulled the whip and wound it around the tree trunk. Du Nan was greatly shocked; he hastily pulled back. Zhang Wuji's change of movements were amazingly fast; he also pulled the rope to counter Du Nan's force. Although the bough of the pine tree was thick, almost half of it had already scooped out hollow by the three monks to protect them from the wind and the rain. This time, a very tough and durable long rope wound around it, and Zhang Wuji and Du Nan's internal energy pulled it at the same time, a loud crashing sound was heard as the pine tree broke right at the hollow part, with the top portion of the tree came crashing down from the sky.

Seizing the opportunity when Du E and Du Jie, two monks were still stunned by this turn of events, Zhang Wuji struck with both palms, with a loud shout he pushed the pine tree where Du E was sitting. In this strike he put the entire life-long cultivated strength into his palms. The pine tree could not stand and snapped off at once.

The two broken pine trees, along with their branches and leaves, fell down on the tree where Du Jie was sitting. These two trees carried the momentum of several thousand catties. Zhang Wuji flew up and landed on the third tree. His feet pushed down and the tree broke. It swayed in the air and slowly fell down. The noise of the broken trees intermingled with the cry and shouts of the crowd of heroes.

Zhang Wuji threw the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands toward Du E and Du Jie. The two monks were busy dodging the falling trees, and now they had to deal with the incoming Sheng Huo Ling tablets; the movements of their hands and feet became chaotic. Zhang Wuji bent his knees and rolled underneath the falling trees, which had not

reached the ground yet. He had entered the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan's center. Using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique, his palms pushed and turned, and the boulder covering the dungeon was shoved open.

"Yifu, come out, quick!" he called out. Afraid that Xie Xun was unwilling to come out, without waiting for a reply, Zhang Wuji put one hand down the hole and grabbed the back of Xie Xun's collar and lifted him up.

Right this moment, Du E and Du Jie's whips arrived. Zhang Wuji was forced to let Xie Xun down. He took out two more Sheng Huo Ling tablets from his bosom and threw the tablets toward the two monks. Quick as lightning his hands grabbed the tip of the whips. Du E and Du Jie were about to exert their internal energy to pull the whips back, but the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets had already arrived in front of their faces with speed that did not give them any leeway. The two monks did not have any choice but let their whips go as they hastily jumped back. It was the only way they could evade the Sheng Huo Ling attack.

In the meantime, Du Nan's left palm was threatening Zhang Wuji's chest. "Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji called out, "Stop him!" Slanting his body sideways to evade, he carried Xie Xun in his arms. As soon as he managed to get Xie Xun out of the three pine trees encirclement, Shaolin Pai would not have anything to say.

"Humph," Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but she hesitated, while Du Nan's right palm followed his left. Zhang Wuji turned his body around to avoid the vital acupoint on his back from being hit, letting the palm to land on his shoulder instead.

Carrying Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji wanted to break out from the pine trees. "Child Wuji," Xie Xun said, "In all my life I have

committed grave sins. In this place I am listening to the scripture about repentance, my heart is at peace. Why do you insist on taking me out?" While saying that, he tried to struggle free.

Zhang Wuji knew Yifu's martial art skill was very high; if he stubbornly refused to go, he could be very difficult to be dealt with. "Yifu," he said, "Please forgive Child's offense!" The five fingers of his right hand moved lightning fast, sealing several acupoints on Xie Xun's thigh, chest and abdomen, rendering Xie Xun immobile temporarily.

Because of this slight delay, the palms of the three Shaolin monks had struck by. "Leave him!" they barked.

Zhang Wuji was aware that the palms of these three monks had surrounded him from all directions. Before the palms arrived, the wind generated by these palms had already pressing him. He had no other choice but put Xie Xun down on the ground, and then lifted his palms to block.

"Zhiruo," he called out, "Quickly take Yifu out!" His palms shook, forming a circle, and he sent his palm strengths to engage the palms of the three monks so that none of them could leave to stop Zhou Zhiruo. It was the highest technique of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; his palms moved randomly, making it hard to tell which one was real, holding the three monks' palm strengths together like glue.

Zhou Zhiruo leaped into the circle toward Xie Xun. "Pei!" Xie Xun spat, "Lowly woman ..."

Zhou Zhiruo reached out and sealed his mute acupoint. "Surnamed Xie," she scolded, "I have come to rescue you with good intentions. Why do you insult me? Your crimes have reached the heavens; your life is hanging by the thread

in my hand. Do you think I cannot kill you?" While saying that, she raised her right hand with her five fingers forming a claw, ready to strike the top of Xie Xun's head.

Zhang Wuji was very anxious to see this. "Zhiruo, no ...!" he hastily said.

At this moment, he was engaged in a stake-it-all battle with the three monks, in which everybody was exerting the internal energy cultivation of their entire life. The three monks did not have any intention to kill him, but in this kind of battle, they had reached the critical moment; where either they injured the enemy, or they themselves would perish. There was simply no room for either side to yield to the opponent.

As Zhang Wuji opened his mouth, his 'chi' was decreased slightly. The three monks' 'topple-the-mountain-and-overturn-the-sea' kind of palm strength immediately surged in. Zhang Wuji had no choice but increase his own strength in defense. Both sides were in a stalemate situation. Their strengths were interlocking each other. They had to continue until victory or defeat was decided, without any chance to escape midway.

Zhou Zhiruo's claw was hung midair, but she did not continue her strike. Casting a cold sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji she said with a cold laugh, "Zhang Wuji, when you abandoned me during the wedding ceremony in Haozhou that day, did you ever imagine there will be a day like today?"

Zhang Wuji's mind was divided into three parts: he was anxious over Xie Xun's safety, he was angry that she chose this critical moment to settle an old score, and he was busy fending off the three monks' palm strength, which was

flooding in towards him. Even if he was completely focused, he would most likely still lose in the end. Much less now that his mind was in confusion, he was facing a more imminent catastrophe. Cold beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, streaming down to his chest and back, soaking his clothes.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were all shocked to see this critical situation. They all had the same thought, namely, they wanted to save Zhang Wuji. Even if they had to lose their lives in the process, they would not regret it. However, they all realized that their own strength was inadequate. Not only they could not break the fight, even if they did attack the Shaolin three monks, the three monks would easily divert the external force toward Zhang Wuji, adding to the force he had to withstand. In the end, instead of helping him, they would harm him.

Raising his voice, Kong Zhi called out, "Three Shishu [martial (younger) uncle], Zhang Jiaozhu has shown kindness to our Sect; please be lenient to him."

But the battle between these four people had reached the stage where they could not back off. Zhang Wuji had never had any intention to harm the three monks. The three monks remembered Zhang Wuji had helped them out of trouble the other day, they were also waiting for an opportunity to stop the battle. Only, both sides were in the 'qi hu nan xia' [riding a tiger, hard to get off] predicament. The spirituality of the three monks had transcended the material world. It was not that they turned a deaf ear to Kong Zhi's cry; they did want to acknowledge him, but they were unable to do so.

Wei Yixiao's shadow flashed by. Like a floating blue smoke, he slipped into the middle of the broken pine trees. He

wanted to pounce on Zhou Zhiruo, but he saw Zhou Zhiruo's right hand was still suspended in the air. If he pounced on her, her claw would certainly strike down on top of Xie Xun's head. If Xie Xun died, Zhang Wuji's heart would be greatly grieved and he would die immediately under the three monks' hands. Thereupon, when Wei Yixiao was less than a 'zhang' away from Zhou Zhiruo, he halted his steps in hesitation and did not dare to make a further move.

That moment, everybody on the peak looked like a statue; nobody dared to neither move nor make any noise. Suddenly Zhou Dian laughed and strode forward.

Yang Xiao was startled. "Dian Xiong," he shouted, "Don't be reckless."

Zhou Dian ignored him; he walked toward the three Shaolin monks and with a smiling face said, "Three great monks, do you eat dog meat?" Reaching into his pocket, he produced a boiled dog leg and waved it in front of Du E's face.

These past two days, Shaolin Temple only served vegetarian dishes to its guests. Zhou Dian loved to drink wine and eat meat; how could he stand eating green vegetables and tofu every day? He went out the previous night to steal a dog and cooked it. After eating his fill, he still had a dog leg, which in this critical moment he used to disturb the Shaolin three monks' concentration.

As soon as they saw it, Yang Xiao and the others were delighted; they thought, "Zhou Dian usually acts like a lunatic, but this time his move is brilliant." They knew that in an internal energy battle, the key was the combatant's concentration. As Zhou Dian stepped forward to create trouble, even if only one of the monks got angry, his concentration might be broken and Zhang Wuji would be

victorious.

The three monks turned a blind eye to him; they completely ignored Zhou Dian. Zhou Dian took the dog leg to his open mouth and took a bite. "Smells good, tastes good!" he said, "Three great monks, why don't you take a bite?" Seeing the monks did not even blink, he brought the dog leg closer to Du E's mouth.

As he was about to shove the dog leg into Du E's mouth, several monks watching from the side shouted, "Baldy Dian, back off quickly!"

As soon as the dog leg touched Du E's lips, suddenly Zhou Dian's arm shook, half of his body turned numb. 'Bang!' the dog leg fell to the ground.

Turned out at this moment Du E's entire body was covered with his internal energy that he was in the 'fly cannot penetrate' realm. As soon as his four limbs and hundreds of bones met with an external force, the force would bounce back.

"Aiyo! Aiyo! Terrible, terrible!" Zhou Dian cried out, "You don't want to eat my dog meat, that's all right. Why did you have to snap it out to the ground? Now it is dirty and wasted. I want compensation, I want compensation!" His hands and feet were flailing all over the place; he raised a clamor.

Unexpectedly, the three monks' concentration was so deep that they were not disturbed by any external demonic influence. Zhou Dian flipped his right hand and fished a short blade from his bosom. "Since you don't appreciate my kindness by eating my dog leg, Laozi [old man - referring to self] will risk everything to fight you." His blade slashed his own face that immediately he was dripping with blood.

The crowd of heroes shouted in shock. Zhou Dian used the short blade to make another slash. His face was covered with blood; he looked terrifyingly fearsome. Regardless of who saw this kind of scene, their hearts would be shocked and disturbed. But in their deep concentration, the Shaolin three monks' eyes, ears, nose and tongue seemed to be closed to the world outside. Not only they did not see the scene Zhou Dian was making, they even seemed unaware of his presence, which was very closed to their bodies.

"Good monk," Zhou Dian loudly called out, "If you don't compensate my dog leg, I'll die in front of you!" Lifting his short blade, he thrust it into his own heart. Because his Cult Leader was in such a dire situation, he was determined to kill himself to disturb the concentration of the three monks.

Suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by; someone flew in and snatched the short blade away from his hand. The yellow shadow then continued sideways, with five fingers striking toward the top of Zhou Zhiruo's head. The technique used was exactly the same as the one Song Qingshu used to kill the Beggar Clan's elders. Zhou Zhiruo's five fingers were less than a foot away from Xie Xun's head, but the enemy's movement was simply too fast; she had no alternative but to turn her hand over to block this attack.

Zhang Wuji's internal energy level was very strong; it was not inferior to the combined energy of the three monks. However, in terms of 'forgetting everything', his meditation skill fell short. He could not reach the stage of 'looking without seeing, hearing without listening' of the outside influence. Seeing that Zhou Zhiruo's hand was threatening Xie Xun, his mind was immediately thrown into confusion. He also saw Zhou Dian stepping forward to create trouble, and then drawing his blade to commit suicide. He saw everything

clearly and was even more anxious.

Currently, his internal breathing was boiling, he was about to spurt out some blood and perish. To suddenly see that woman in yellow gown leaping forward into the circle, snatching the short blade from Zhou Dian's hand, and attacking Zhou Zhiruo, Zhang Wuji knew that Xie Xun was out of danger. His heart was delighted and his internal energy was growing so that he was able to neutralize the three monks' internal energy attacks one by one. As a result, now the four of them were back into the stalemate situation.

Although Du E and the others were not affected by outside disturbance, they were able to differentiate the subtle decrease and increase of either side's strength. They realized the sudden increase of the opponent force, but the force did not change from defensive to offensive; which was precisely the best opportunity to withdraw without endangering either side. The three monks' minds were interlinked; they concurrently reduced their own power. Zhang Wuji followed by reducing his own power one notch. The three monks then reduced their power another notch. By 'you reduce one notch, I reduce one notch', in a short time both sides had withdrew their power completely.

Four men laughed together and stood up at the same time. Zhang Wuji cupped his hands and bowed low. Du E, Du Jie and Du Nan also clasped their palms to return the propriety. Almost together they said, "My utmost admiration!"

Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw that lady in yellow had already fought Zhou Zhiruo. The lady in yellow was barehanded, while Zhou Zhiruo still had the whip in her right hand and the dagger in her left, yet the lady in yellow did not show the least sign of defeat. The lady in yellow's martial art seemed to have the same source as Zhou Zhiruo's. They both

moved swiftly with seemingly infinite variations, yet her hands and feet looked upright without any sign of demonical influence. If Zhou Zhiruo moved like a ghost, then the lady in yellow moved like an immortal.

Zhang Wuji took a second look and knew that the lady in yellow would certainly win without any chance of defeat, and that his Yifu was completely out of danger. But he had a feeling that the lady in yellow was tantalizing Zhou Zhiruo; it seemed like she was trying to find out the ins and outs of Zhou Zhiruo's martial art. She would have had flattened Zhou Zhiruo early on if she took the fight seriously.

"Shanzai, shanzai!" Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, although you cannot defeat us three brothers, we three brothers also cannot defeat you. Xie Juzhi [warrior Xie], you are free to go!" Having said that, he stepped forward and unsealed Xie Xun's acupoints, while saying, "Xie Juzhi, lay down your saber and follow the teachings of Buddha. The gateway to our Buddha is wide open, there is no one in this world who cannot be brought to cross over. You and I have spent many days together on this peak. That is also destiny."

Xie Xun stood up and said, "Merciful Buddha. The three Dashi [reverend, grandmaster] have shown the direction to the bright road. Xie Xun cannot thank you enough."

Suddenly they heard the lady in yellow shouted in clear voice. She flipped her left hand to grab Zhou Zhiruo's long whip, followed by her elbow striking the acupoint on her chest. Her right hand opened up, her five fingers were hanging on top of Zhou Zhiruo's head.

"Do you want to taste the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' [nine yin white bone claw]?" she asked. Zhou Zhiruo was unable to move; she closed her eyes, waiting for death.

Although Xie Xun's eyes could not see anything, he could hear clearly what had been going on around him. He stepped forward and bowed with cupped hands while saying, "Miss has saved this father and son's lives. We feel greatly indebted. There will come a day when this Miss Zhou will meet her just retribution, if she does not repent from her unrighteous ways. I am asking earnestly that Miss would spare her life today."

The lady in yellow said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang turned from your ways really quickly." Her shadow swayed as she withdrew.

End of Chapter 38.

Chapter 39 - The Hidden Military Strategy Manual

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The two men fought faster and faster that they had exchanged seventy, eighty stances in a very short period of time. Xie Xun was more than ten years younger than Cheng Kun; his physique was considerably stronger. The many years he spent on the extraordinarily cold and extremely hot Bing Huo Island had given his internal energy cultivation a tremendous advantage. He did not show the slightest sign of defeat even after fighting for more than a hundred stances.

Taking Xie Xun by the hand, Zhang Wuji was about to walk away when suddenly Xie Xun said, "Hold on!" Pointing to an old monk among the Shaolin crowd he called out, "Cheng Kun! Come out! In the presence of the heroes from all over the world, I want you to clearly explain all kinds of gratitude and grudges of the past."

The crowd of heroes was startled; they only saw a hunchback old monk with a nondescript face. Definitely he did not look like Cheng Kun. Zhang Wuji was about to say, "He is not Cheng Kun." But he heard Xie Xun say, "Cheng Kun, you might change your appearance, but you can't change your voice. I only heard your cough, but I know who you are."

The old monk grinned fiendishly and said, "Who would listen to such nonsense from a blind man like you?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Zhang Wuji recognized him immediately. That day on the Brightness Peak, when he was held captive inside the cloth sack, he had heard Cheng Kun's lengthy speech. He clearly remembered his voice. This time Cheng Kun deliberately made his voice sound throaty and his disguise was perfect, but in the end he could not change his voice.

Zhang Wuji leaped up to cut Cheng Kun's escape route. "Yuan Zhen Dashi, Cheng Kun Qianbei [senior, older generation]," he said, "A real man is straightforward and upright. Why don't you show your true face?"

Turned out Cheng Kun had disguised himself and mingled among the crowd. All along he managed to hide his true identity. But when the lady in yellow subdued Zhou Zhiruo, which he did not anticipate, he could not restrain from coughing lightly. Ever since he turned blind, Xie Xun's ability to distinguish sound grew. Besides, he harbored a deep hatred toward Cheng Kun; naturally, he would remember Cheng Kun with an 'inscribed in the heart, engraved on the bone' kind of memory. To Xie Xun's ears, this light cough was no less than a thunder in the midst of a clear blue sky; he recognized him immediately.

Cheng Kun realized his plot had fallen through and he had been exposed. Straightening his back up he shouted, "Shaolin monks, listen to this: The Devil Cult has come to disturb the holy place of Buddha. They are here to despise our Sect. Everybody must fight together. Show them no mercy."

His followers immediately responded; they unsheathed their weapons and charged forward to fight.

Because his martial brother, Abbot Kong Wen, had fallen into the hands of the Temple's rebels, Kong Zhi was forced to suppress his anger for quite a long time. This time, hearing Yuan Zhen issue an order to fight against the Ming Cult, he knew that his temple's monks would suffer countless damage if a tangled battle ensued. Taking everything into consideration, in the end, the lives of the monks in his temple were more important. Thereupon he shouted, "Kong Wen Fangzhang has fallen into this rebel Yuan Zhen's hands.

All disciples must capture this traitor first then we'll save Fangzhang." All of a sudden there was great confusion on the peak.

Zhang Wuji saw that Zhou Zhiruo was still kneeling on the ground; she looked utterly dejected, he felt sorry for her. Zhang Wuji came to her, unsealed her acupoints, and helped her get up. Zhou Zhiruo pushed his arm away and leaped toward the crowd of Emei disciples.

They heard Xie Xun say in loud and clear voice, "Everything that happens today is between Cheng Kun and I, two people only. All kinds of gratitude and grudges ought to be concluded by us, two people, alone. Shifu, my entire skill came from you; Cheng Kun, my whole family was murdered by you. Your great kindness and deep animosity, we will settle it between us today."

Cheng Kun realized that Kong Zhi had disregarded everything by giving the order; he also knew that the honest Shaolin Temple monks were simply too numerous compared to his followers, which were only about a tenth of the entire Shaolin disciples. It looked like his ambition to become the Shaolin Abbot had also turned into an illusion. He thought, "Xie Xun has committed all kinds of evil deeds. If I subdue him, I can push all the blame on him. His martial art came from me, plus he is blind; I don't see any reason why I cannot defeat him." Therefore, he said, "Xie Xun, I don't know how many heroes and warriors of Jianghu lost their lives in your hands. Today, you are taking the bunch of Devil Cult's devil heads to come to Shaolin and create trouble in Buddhist paradise, going against the heroes of the world. I regret teaching you martial art in the past. Now I have to clean up my own school; I have to punish you, a renegade disciple who betrayed his school's forefathers." He then strode toward Xie Xun.

Xie Xun raised his voice, "All heroes hear me: Xie Xun's martial art was taught by this gentleman Cheng Kun. But because he failed to defile my wife, he murdered my father and mother, my wife and my son. Although I must love and honor my master, I must love and honor my parents more. I want to seek revenge on him, do you think I deserve to do it?"

All around the heroes thundered their response, "You deserve to seek revenge, you deserve to seek revenge!"

Without saying anything, Cheng Kun sent out his palm to hack Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun leaned his head sideways to avoid the strike on his vital point. 'Bang!' the palm hit his shoulder.

Xie Xun grunted, but did not hit back. "Cheng Kun," he said, "When you passed on this move, 'chang hong jing tian' [long rainbow traverse the sky], you said that as soon as you hit the opponent's body, you must immediately send out the 'hun yuan' [originating formation] chi to injure the enemy; why didn't you send out any strength? Are you getting old that your strength is gone?"

Actually, Cheng Kun's first move was a fake one; he did not anticipate that the opponent did not even make any effort to evade so his strike was on target. But he did not send any power with this move therefore Xie Xun was not injured at all.

Cheng Kun's right palm followed his fake left hand strike. Xie Xun leaned his head sideways again, but still he did not hit back. Cheng Kun sent out a chain-kick attack with his both legs. 'Bang, bang!' Xie Xun received these two kicks on the side of his body. These two kicks carried an extremely fierce force that even though Xie Xun's physique was sturdy, he

could not withstand it. 'Wah!' he spurted out a mouthful of blood.

"Yifu!" Zhang Wuji anxiously called, "Fight back! Why do you take a beating without retaliating?"

Xie Xun's body swayed several times. With a bitter laugh he said, "He was my Shifu, I ought to take a couple of kicks and a palm from him." With a sudden long whistle, Xie Xun flipped his palm and hack down on Cheng Kun.

"Bad luck! Bad luck!" Cheng Kun silently cried out, "I only knew that his hatred to me was as deep as the ocean, and that he would stake everything he has as soon as he sees me. If I had known that he was willing to take my first three moves, I would have strike him with killer strike and thus I would not have missed this good opportunity."

Seeing the swiftness and fierceness of Xie Xun's palm, Cheng Kun immediately swept his left hand diagonally to fend off Xie Xun's palm power, while he moved a half turn toward Xie Xun's back. Taking advantage of Xie Xun's blindness, Cheng Kun's palm silently pressed on Xie Xun's back. But it was as if Xie Xun could see; he sent a kick backward. Cheng Kun leaped up gently. Like a big predatory bird, he swooped down from the sky. He was more than seventy years old, but his agility was not inferior to those of the younger people.

Xie Xun raised both of his hands to block. Cheng Kun's downward strike met Xie Xun's palms. Borrowing the momentum from the impact, Cheng Kun's body shot up once again. He made a gentle maneuver in the air and struck down again.

The two men exchanged blow after blow. They fought faster and faster that they had exchanged seventy, eighty stances

in a very short period of time. Although Xie Xun's pair of eyes could not see a thing, his martial art skill came from Cheng Kun, so he knew Cheng Kun's fists and kicks by heart. No matter how many times Cheng Kun changed his style, Xie Xun was able to anticipate his movements without difficulty. After decades of separation, both men had enjoyed tremendous advancement in terms of their internal energy cultivation, but the styles and stances were still their martial art school's techniques.

Xie Xun did not need to use his eyes; as he launched a strike, he knew exactly how the opponent would react, as well as by which stance, or at least the most likely variation, the opponent would counterattack. In addition, he was more than ten years younger than Cheng Kun; his physique was considerably stronger. The many years he spent on the extraordinarily cold and extremely hot Bing Huo Island had given his internal energy cultivation a tremendous advantage. For these reasons, he did not show the slightest sign of defeat even after fighting for more than a hundred stances.

Xie Xun's animosity toward Cheng Kun was as deep as the ocean. He had waited bitterly for several decades. This time as he met his archenemy, at first Zhang Wuji thought that Xie Xun would disregard everything and fought Cheng Kun with all he had so that both sides would perish together. Contrary to his expectation, each style and every stance Xie Xun launched was exceptionally steady and calm, his line of defense was also very tight. Initially Zhang Wuji was astonished, but after watching the battle progress for dozens of moves, he finally understood.

Cheng Kun's martial art skill was not inferior to Du E, Du Nan, three monks. If Xie Xun brazenly attacked with all he had, he might not be able to last more than three hundred moves. It

was evident that the deeper Xie Xun's hatred toward Cheng Kun, the more cautious he was in his movements. He was afraid that he would be destroyed under Cheng Kun's hands before he was able to avenge his father, mother, wife and son's blood debt.

After about two hundred moves, Xie Xun gave a loud shout. His fist struck out with a strong gust of wind.

"Qi Shang Quan! [seven-injury fist]" Guan Neng of Kongtong Pai called out. He saw Xie Xun's left and right fists continuously move with matchless overwhelming power. The elders of Kongtong Pai looked at each other with amazement; they could not help but feel ashamed of their own inferiority.

Cheng Kun subsequently evaded three fists. As Xie Xun's forth fist arrived, Cheng Kun swept his right palm horizontally. 'Bang!' The fist and the palm collided. With loose hair and beard, Xie Xun stood motionless; while Cheng Kun was forced to withdraw three steps back.

Many of the heroes watching the fight were cheering inwardly. By this time, it was already clear to the Jianghu people how the enmity between Xie Xun and Cheng Kun started, and how it escalated. Although the people were angry with Xie Xun because he was too ruthless, excessively harming the innocents, they understood the cruel fate Xie Xun met. On the other hand, they thought Cheng Kun was too malicious and evil. Therefore, other than a few people whose close friends and family were killed by Xie Xun, most of the people present hoped he would triumph.

Xie Xun rushed three steps forward. Again, with strong gusts of wind his fists punched left and right. Cheng Kun parried with his pair of palms, while he took three more steps backward.

“Not good!” Zhang Wuji cried out silently, “Cheng Kun is using the Jiu Yang Gong [nine ‘yang’ energy], which he learned after he entered Kong Jian Shen Seng’s [divine monk] tutelage. He did not pass it on to Yifu.”

Xie Xun trained the Qi Shang Quan in a rush. As a result, he had suffered internal injury. His fist strength was actually flawed. Cheng Kun had a deep knowledge of this fist technique’s crucial keys; therefore, he deliberately showed weakness, but in actuality, he was sending out his Jiu Yang Gong to counterattack the opponent. With each fist Xie Xun sent, Cheng Kun received about 70% of the force and neutralized it with his Jiu Yang Gong, while he sent the remaining 30% back to Xie Xun.

‘Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!’ Xie Xun sent out twelve punches. Cheng Kun took a dozen or so steps backward. It appeared that Xie Xun was gaining the upper hand; however, the internal injury he suffered was actually getting heavier. Zhang Wuji was extremely anxious, but he knew this was his Yifu’s lifelong dream to finally have the opportunity to exact his revenge; obviously, he could not meddle by giving him a hand. Yet if Xie Xun continued fighting like this, in a few dozen moves he would inevitably vomit blood and die.

“Yuan Zhen,” with a cold voice Kong Zhi suddenly said, “Did my Shixiong [martial brother] teach you this Shaolin Jiu Yang Gong to harm others?”

Cheng Kun sneered and said, “My En Shi [benevolent master] lost his life under the Qi Shang Quan. I am avenging En Shi today to wipe out a disgrace.”

Suddenly Zhao Min called out, “Kong Jian Shen Seng’s Jiu Yang Gong cultivation was far above yours. How come he

could not withstand the Qi Shang Quan? Kong Jian Dashi was harmed by your traitorous hands. You deceived the Senior to come forward and resolve your enmity; you deceived him to take a beating without hitting back. Hey, hey, look, look! Who's that standing behind you? His face is full of blood; he looks at your back with angry glare. Isn't that Kong Jian Shen Seng?"

Cheng Kun knew perfectly well that she was blabbering nonsense, but what he had done had been weighing his conscience down, so he did feel guilty and he shivered involuntarily.

Right this moment, Xie Xun sent another punch. Cheng Kun used his palm to block. Surprisingly, he did not retreat. Because of Zhao Min's distraction, his concentration was divided and his 'chi' did not flow properly. Xie Xun's punch made the 'chi' and blood in Cheng Kun's breast turned upside down. He was forced to use his 'qing gong' to run around Xie Xun for a while until he could regulate his breathing.

"Kong Jian Shen Seng," Zhao Min called out, "Nail him! That's right! Just like that! Blow your breath on the back of his neck! You died under your disciple's hands, he must also die under his disciple's hands. It is called 'karma'. Lao Tian Ye [lit. old master of the sky – a reference to God or the Heaven] has eyes, the just retribution is coming."

The hair on Cheng Kun's back stood up. He did not believe in ghosts, but at that time he indeed felt a puff of cold wind on the back of his neck. He was flustered. He did not remember that the wind had always been blowing on that peak all year long. Besides, Xie Xun and he were leaping up and down in their fight; naturally his back was blown by the wind.

Zhao Min could see doubt was starting to grow in Cheng Kun's mind, she shouted, "Aiyo! Cheng Kun, watch your back! You don't dare to turn your head? Look down to the shadow on ground. There are only two people fighting, where did the third shadow come from?"

Cheng Kun could not help but look down. He did see that between the two shadows, there was another dark shadow. His heart skipped a beat. Xie Xun's punch arrived. Cheng Kun did not have enough time to evade; he was forced to use his fist to meet the incoming fist head-on. 'Bang!' Two enormous forces collided. They were both shaken and they were both pushed one step backward. Then Cheng Kun could see clearly that the extra shadow was actually a broken pine tree trunk.

When the battle dragged on with him unable to achieve the victory, Cheng Kun had already been impatient. "He is my disciple," he thought, "And he is blind; yet I still cannot deal with him. My followers watching from the side won't accept it. Too bad my special skill 'huan yin zhi' [lit. fantasy 'yin' finger] was broken by the pure 'yang' energy of that extremely loathsome little thief, Zhang Wuji, that night; otherwise, how could I fight such a long fight with Xie Xun right now? Currently the situation is dangerous. I must subdue this renegade disciple as quickly as possible. Only then can I hold the Ming Cult at bay and also provoke those people who have grudges against him. At least I can still escape with my life." As he made this decision, his footwork changed. Making his steps as quiet as possible, he took two steps backward toward the broken pine tree.

Xie Xun sent three punches in succession while he took two steps forward. Cheng Kun retreated two steps. He wanted to entice Xie Xun so that he would stumble on the broken pine tree. Xie Xun was about to chase Cheng Kun forward when

Zhang Wuji called out, "Yifu, watch your steps!"

Xie Xun shivered; he stepped sideways to avoid the obstacle. But as he was hesitating, Cheng Kun seized the opportunity to launch his silent punch, aimed at Xie Xun's chest. Cheng Kun suddenly sent out his force and Xie Xun fell backward. Cheng Kun raised his foot to kick Xie Xun's skull. Xie Xun rolled away and quickly stood up. Blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth.

Cheng Kun stood motionless. His right palm stretched out slowly.

When Xie Xun fought Cheng Kun, he relied on his knowledge of Cheng Kun's techniques, but also by listening to the wind to distinguish the direction. This time Cheng Kun stretched out his palm without using any particular technique, slowly reaching out toward Xie Xun's face. Suddenly his palm struck Xie Xun's shoulder. Xie Xun staggered a few steps and braced himself to stop.

A lot of the heroes on the side were not happy; they shouted one after another, "A sighted person fighting a blind, and still using this despicable trick!"

Cheng Kun paid no attention; he slowly raised his palm to strike again. Xie Xun focused his attention to listen. As he felt the enemy palm was coming, he raised his hand to block.

Seeing the yellow hair on Xie Xun's head flutter, the corner of his mouth was daubed in blood, Zhang Wuji was very angry and anxious at the same time. He knew that if this kind of fight continued, Xie Xun would undoubtedly die under Cheng Kun's hands. Yet if he stepped forward to lend a hand in this situation, even if he managed to kill Cheng Kun, his Yifu would certainly regret it for the rest of his life. Grabbing Zhao

Min's hand, he anxiously said, "Quickly think of a good way to help him."

"Can you stealthily launch secret projectiles to blind that old thief's eyes?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "Yifu will not let me do such thing even if he has to die!" he said.

Meanwhile, he that saw Cheng Kun was slowly raising his palm again. Zhao Min suddenly shouted, "Chest!"

Xie Xun sent a jab straight out. Cheng Kun pulled back his palm without making any contact. Again and again he launched several slow attacks, but each time Zhao Min foiled his attacks by shouting his target. Seeing his tactic fail, Cheng Kun changed plan. He raised his palm slowly toward Xie Xun's right shoulder.

"Right shoulder!" Zhao Min called out.

Cheng Kun's left shoulder moved slightly. Zhang Wuji immediately understood his intention. "Back!" he shouted.

When Xie Xun heard Zhao Min's shout, he waved his right arm to block the palm threatening his right shoulder. To his surprise, Cheng Kun's palm was an empty move; when he followed Zhao Min's warning by moving his right arm, Cheng Kun's left palm entered Xie Xun's open defense. 'Slap!' His palm heavily struck Xie Xun's back. Although Zhang Wuji's warning came in time, Cheng Kun's palm was simply too swift. By the time Xie Xun heard the warning, it was already too late to change his move.

The crowd shouted in alarm. Xie Xun vomited a mouthful of blood, most of it sprayed onto Cheng Kun's face.

“Ah!” Cheng Kun cried out while reaching up to wipe his face. Xie Xun rolled down on the ground. Suddenly they both screamed and disappeared together.

Turned out as soon as Xie Xun rolled down, he grabbed both of Cheng Kun’s legs and furiously pulled him down that both of them fell into the underground dungeon together.

The dungeon was filled with water reaching to their necks. It was also pitch black inside that Cheng Kun immediately became like a blind person. Hastily he leaped back to get away from the enemy, but the dungeon was very narrow that as he leaped, his back crashed heavily onto the rock wall. He wanted to jump up, but his lower abdomen was struck by Xie Xun’s Qi Shang Quan. Severe pain rushed into his heart instantly.

Cheng Kun realized his injury was not light. If he continued leaping, he would be hit again. Thereupon he changed his tactic. He used the ‘xiao qin na shou’ [lit. little ‘grab and capture’ or grappling technique] to fight the enemy.

This ‘xiao qin na shou’ was very effective to use in close combat in the darkness. It possessed an exquisite ability to adapt to changes in a marvelous and rapid way. Although the eyes could not see, the fingers, palms, arms and elbows could be used to detect the enemy, and then grabbed, clawed, hit, tore, poked, hooked or struck the enemy’s body.

Xie Xun gave a loud shout and also used the ‘xiao qin na shou’ to fight back.

The crowd only heard shouts coming out of the dungeon again and again, mixed with rapid noise of fists and palms collided with each other or with the opponent’s body, just

like the noise of firecrackers. Large sheets of water splashed out of the dungeon. It appeared that the two men were attacking each other at full speed.

Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping madly as he thought that if right this moment his Yifu met a dangerous situation, he would be helpless to render his assistance, since he obviously could not jump into the dungeon to save his Yifu. In his anxiety, his back was wet with cold sweat.

Xie Xun had been blind for more than twenty years; his ability to distinguish shape from listening to the noise was very well trained. He was accustomed to rely on his ears instead of his eyes. On the other hand, Cheng Kun fought like a blind person amidst the splashing water; he hit and grabbed randomly, so the table was turned in that now he was at a disadvantage.

Cheng Kun panicked. He could not think of anything else except moving his arm rapidly like a gust of wind under a sudden downpour. He increased the speed of his 'xiao qin na shou' while using only killer moves with this thought in his mind, "I am going to stake everything I have; whatever happens, we must return to fighting above the ground."

Step by step the crowd of heroes approached the dungeon. Their palms were wet with cold sweats, while their ears heard continuous shouting of Cheng Kun and Xie Xun from underground. It seemed like victory and defeat had not been decided yet.

Suddenly Cheng Kun's scream was heard from underground, followed by the two men jumping out of the dungeon together. Under the sunlight, everybody could see that both Cheng Kun and Xie Xun's eyes were bleeding. The two men stood still, facing each other.

What happened was: during the fierce battle, with open arms Xie Xun's palms struck down toward Cheng Kun. Cheng Kun was delighted. "Got you!" he shouted, while the two fingers of his right hand struck Xie Xun's eyes. It was the move 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fight over a pearl], which was quite common. However, because it was launched in the midst of 'xiao qin na shou', it carried an enormous power. He expected the opponent to lean sideways to evade, and then his left hand would sweep across the opponent head. He was certain the opponent's vital 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint, located on the temples] would be hit. Contrary to his expectation, Xie Xun neither evaded nor blocked his strike; he also shouted, "Got you!" with the same 'shuang long qiang zhu', his two fingers poked Cheng Kun's eyes.

As soon as Cheng Kun's fingers pierced Xie Xun's eyes, like a flash of lightning a thought came into his mind, "Bad!" followed by stabbing pain as his own eyes were pierced by Xie Xun's two fingers.

Both men suffered the same injury. However, Xie Xun had been blind for a long time. As he was pierced by Cheng Kun's fingers, he only suffered some superficial wound. Cheng Kun, on the other hand, had turned blind.

With a cold laugh Xie Xun said, "Does it feel good, being a blind man?" With a loud shout he launched another punch.

Cheng Kun could not see anything; he was unable to evade. The 'Qi Shang Quan' hit him squarely on the chest. Xie Xun followed with a left hand punch. Cheng Kun staggered several steps backward until his back was against the broken pine tree; blood gushing out from his mouth.

Suddenly Du E opened his mouth, "Just retribution! Shanzai,

shanzai!”

Xie Xun stopped dead on his track; he had concentrated his power on the third punch, but right now it stopped midway. “I should have punched you thirteen times with the ‘Qi Shang Quan’; but your martial art skill is gone and you are blind, henceforth you have become a handicapped person and thus will not do wicked things on the earth anymore. You need not receive the remaining eleven punches.”

Seeing that Xie Xun achieved a total victory, Zhang Wuji and the others cheered. But suddenly Xie Xun sat on the ground; the bones on his entire body were cracking.

Zhang Wuji was shocked, knowing that Xie Xun was using his own internal energy to destroy his own martial art skill. “Yifu,” he hastily said, “Don’t!” He rushed forward and stretching out his hand, using the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, he pressed Xie Xun’s back to stop him.

Xie Xun suddenly leaped up and fiercely punched his own chest; blood gushing out from his mouth.

Zhang Wuji busily reached out to support him, but he felt that Xie Xun’s hand was feeble. His martial art skill had definitely gone, and would be very difficult to recover.

Xie Xun pointed his finger toward Cheng Kun and said, “Cheng Kun, you murdered my entire family. Today I destroyed your eyes and wiped out your martial art skill. We are even now. Shifu, my martial art skill was taught by you. Today I willingly destroyed it; I am giving it back to you. From now on, there is no gratitude nor grudges between me and you. You will never see my face again and I also will never see your face.”

Cheng Kun pressed his hands on his eyes. He was groaning from the pain, but did not say anything. The crowd of heroes looked at each other; who would have thought that this battle between master and disciple would end up like this?

In a loud and clear voice Xie Xun said, "I, Xie Xun, have done much wickedness; I have never hoped I would live until today. If there is anyone among the heroes of the world whose family or martial brother died under the Old Xie's hands, you are free to take the Old Xie's life. Wuji, you must not stop them, nor you must avenge me in the future and thus adding to your Yifu's guilt."

Zhang Wuji consented with tears in his eyes.

Although there were quite a number of heroes who harbored deep enmity with Xie Xun, they all saw how Xie Xun had avenged his entire family only by destroying Cheng Kun's martial art skill. However, Xie Xun's own martial art was also gone. Therefore, if anybody went forward and stabbed him with a sword, or punched him with a fist, his action would be considered a hero or a warrior's bad deed.

Suddenly a man stepped out from among the crowd. "Xie Xun," he said, "My father, 'Yan Ling Fei Tian Dao' [The Wild-Goose-Plume-Flying-to-the-sky Saber] Qiu Lao Yingxiong [old hero Qiu] lost his life under your hands. I am here to avenge my Xian Fu [deceased father]!" Finished speaking, he walked toward Xie Xun.

"That's right," Xie Xun sadly said, "Your honorable father died under my hands. Qiu Xiong [brother Qiu], you may proceed."

The man surnamed Qiu drew his saber and took two more steps closer.

Zhang Wuji could not think straight; if he did not act, his Yifu would lose his life under this man's saber, but if he stopped this man, he was afraid that he would add to the agony his Yifu had to endure for the rest of his life. Much less, Yifu was blind and had lost his martial art skill; it was difficult to say whether Yifu would live a happy life or not. His body shook; he took two steps forward without intending to do so.

"Wuji," Xie Xun roared, "If you stop anybody from exacting their revenge, you are being greatly unfilial to me. After I die, go down into the dungeon and take a look. You will understand everything."

The man surnamed Qiu lifted his saber in front of his chest. Suddenly tears started to flow down from his eyes. He spat on Xie Xun's face and said with a choking voice, "My Xian Fu was a hero. If his spirit in Heaven saw me killing a blind man whose martial art skill has gone, he would be angry with me for being unworthy ..." 'Clang!' his saber fell to the ground. Covering up his face, he rushed back into the crowd.

Next, a middle-aged woman came out and said, "Xie Xun, I am here to avenge my husband, 'Yin Yang Pan Guan' ['pan guan' is a mythological judge of the underworld], Yin Dapeng." Walking toward Xie Xun, she also spat on his face; then she walked away while crying loudly.

Seeing his Yifu was being humiliated in succession, outwardly, Zhang Wuji was standing unperturbed, but inwardly, his heart was like being sheared by a knife. The heroes and warriors of the Wulin world considered death lightly, but they would never take any insult. It was called 'a warrior can be killed, but not disgraced.' These two people's spittle on Xie Xun's face was the greatest insult, but he endured it patiently. It was clear that he acknowledged his

sins in the past and that he was pained with regret, and thus he took the repentance seriously.

One by one people were coming out from the crowd; some slapped Xie Xun on the face, some kicked him, some opened their mouths in curses, but Xie Xun only sit with bowed head, enduring everything in silence. He did not withdraw, he did not even try to talk back.

In this manner, more than thirty people came out one by one to humiliate Xie Xun. Finally, a Taoist priest with long beard stepped out. He bowed and said, "Pin Dao [lit. impoverished Daoist - referring to self] Taixu Zi [Translator's note: I am not an expert in Daoism, but it seems to me that many Taoist priest used 'Zi' (lit. son or male child) as the last part (suffix?) of their title. Remember the Seven Quanzhen priests? Anyway, this priest's name means 'great emptiness']. My two Shixiong lost their lives under Xie Daxia's fists. Looking at Xie Daxia's character today, Pin Dao is deeply ashamed. Pin Dao's sword has also killed innumerable warriors, both from the black and white worlds. If I came to you to seek revenge, other people would also come to me to seek revenge." Having said that, he drew his sword, his left hand reached up and plucked the blade of the sword with his fingers. 'Clang!' the sword broke into two. He tossed the broken sword to the ground, saluted Xie Xun, turned around and left.

The crowd of heroes broke into soft murmurs. This Taixu Zi was not very well known in the Jianghu, yet his martial art skill was actually superb. However, what was harder to come by was his broadmindedness; his ability to rebuke himself.

After he left, it seemed like no one else would come out to make things difficult for Xie Xun. To everybody's surprise, while they were still talking among themselves, a middle-aged nun stepped out from among the Emei Pai's crowd. She

walked toward Xie Xun and said, "To avenge my husband's murder, I also will resolve it by spitting on you!" As soon as she said that, she opened her mouth and spat toward Xie Xun's forehead. Who would have thought that this spittle carried a strong gust of wind? Turned out it was not spittle, but a date stone steel nail.

Xie Xun heard the difference in the sound of the wind. He smiled bitterly, but did not evade at all. He thought, "If I die right now, it can be considered already too late."

Suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by. The lady in yellow dashed forward. Her sleeve swished, and the date stone nail was rolled inside the sleeve. "How must we address Shitai by your Buddhist title?" she asked sternly.

As the nun saw her attack fail, a slightly frightened expression appeared on her face. "I am called Jing Zhao [lit. still/calm/quiet illumination]," she said.

"Hmm, Jing Zhao, Jing Zhao ..." the lady in yellow said, "Before you left home to become a nun, what was your husband's name? How did he die under Xie Daxia's hands?"

Jing Zhao angrily said, "What does it have to do with you? Why do you meddle in other people's business?"

The lady in yellow replied, "Xie Daxia repents from his former sins. If anybody wanted to avenge his father, brother, martial family or friends, even if he is cut into thousand pieces, Xie Daxia would accept his fate willingly; other people have no right to interfere. But if there are people with malicious intention, trying to fish in the muddled water, trying to kill him to shut his mouth, then it becomes everybody's business."

Jing Zhao said, "Between Xie Xun and I, there are no grudges

and no enmity; why would I want to kill him to shut his ...” The last word ‘mouth’ had not come out of her mouth when she suddenly realized she had blundered. She stopped abruptly. Her face turned deathly pale; and she could not help but cast a glance toward Zhou Zhiruo.

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow said, “You have no grudges and no enmity with Xie Daxia, then why did you want to kill him to shut his mouth? Humph, among the twelve Emei Pai’s ‘Jing’ generation nuns, Jing Xuan, Jing Xu, Jing Kong, Jing Hui, Jing Jia, and Jing Zhao, are all virgins when they left home. Where did the husband come from?”

Without saying anything, Jing Zhao turned around and walked away.

“Do you think it’s this easy to walk away just like that?” the lady in yellow barked.

Rushing two steps forward, her palm reached out to grab her shoulder. Jing Zhao turned her shoulder to evade. The lady in yellow’s right index finger pierced toward her waist, followed by a kick to hit the ‘huan tiao xue’ [‘hop the loop’ acupoint] on her thigh. Jing Zhao grunted and fell down to the ground.

“Miss Zhou,” in a cold voice the lady in yellow said, “This ploy of killing someone to shut his mouth is very cruel.”

In the same cold voice Zhou Zhiruo replied, “Jing Zhao Shijie is seeking revenge against Xie Xun. What ‘killing someone to shut his mouth’?” Waving her left hand she said, “There are countless disciples from prestigious upright sects in here who fail to distinguish the just from the evil, willingly associate themselves with unorthodox demonic sects. It’s not worthwhile for Emei Pai to be involved with the murky water. Let’s go.”

The Emei Pai crowd responded together and stood up immediately. Two female disciples helped Jing Zhao. The lady in yellow did not stop them. Zhou Zhiruo led her fellow disciples going down the peak.

Zhang Wuji walked toward the lady in yellow. Cupping his fists, he said, "I have received many help from Jiejie; my gratitude is beyond words. I wish to know your illustrious name, so that Zhang Wuji can cherish it in his heart day and night."

The lady in yellow showed a faint smile. She said, "Behind the Mount Zhong Nan, the Tomb of the Living Dead, the Divine Eagle and Gallant Knights vanished from the Jianghu." [Translator's note: it was like a poem of four characters each: Zhong Nan Shan Hou, Huo Si Ren Mu, Shen Diao Xia Lu, Jue Ji Jiang Hu.] Finished speaking, she tucked her gown and returned the salute. Her hand beckoned, the eight young maidens wearing black and white followed her floating away.

Zhang Wuji took a step forward and said, "Jiejie, please stay."

Unexpectedly, the lady in yellow did not pay him any attention; she continued going down the peak.

"Yang Jiejie, Yang Jiejie!" the young Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, Shi Hongshi called out.

From the waist of the hill came the lady in yellow's reply, "I am asking Zhang Jiaozhu's unreserved involvement in helping the Beggar Clan solving their important matters."

"Wuji accepts the order," Zhang Wuji replied in loud and clear voice.

“Many thanks, then!” the lady said. These three words ‘duo xie le’ came from a distant, since she had been far away, but her voice was still very clear. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel a sudden emptiness in his heart.

Kong Zhi went to Cheng Kun and sternly shouted, “Yuan Zhen, quickly tell your followers to release the Fangzhang. If there is any unexpected misfortune to the old Fangzhang, you will heap more sin to your head.”

Forcing a smile, Cheng Kun said, “Since things have come this far, everybody will perish together. Even if I want to release Kong Wen He Shang [monk Kong Wen] now, I am afraid we are already too late. You are not blind, are you? Can’t you see the blazing flame?”

Kong Zhi was taken aback, he turned his head to look down from the peak and saw black smoke and tongues of fire rising up from the Temple complex. Startled, he said, “The Damo Hall is on fire! Quickly put out the fire!”

The crowd of monks was thrown into confusion; they scrambled down the hill at once. Suddenly they saw from all around the Damo Hall columns of water like white dragons rose up and poured down on the blaze, suppressing the flame.

“Amitufo,” Kong Zhi joined his palms and chanted the name of Buddha, “The ancient Shaolin Temple has once again escape disaster.”

Not too long afterwards, two monks rushed up the peak to give their report, “Reporting to Shishu [martial (younger) uncle], the rebel followers of Yuan Zhen set fire to burn down the Damo Hall. Fortunately, for the sake of justice and loyalty, the heroes under the Hong Shui Flag of the Ming Cult

have extinguished the raging fire.”

Kong Zhi went toward Zhang Wuji, joined his palms and said, “The thousand years old ancient temple Shaolin is spared from the fire, all thanks to Zhang Jiaozhu’s great kindness and virtue; one the old monk will never be able to repay even if my body is ground to powder.”

Zhang Wuji returned the salute and answered modestly, “We only did what we ought to do; Da Shi need not be overly courteous.”

Kong Zhi said, “Kong Wen Shixiong is being held prisoner in the Damo Hall by this traitor. Although the fire is out, I do not know Shixiong’s safety yet. Zhang Jiaozhu and the other heroes please wait here for a moment, Laodi [lit. old younger brother – referring to self] must go and see.”

Cheng Kun laughed out loud and said, “Kong Wen’s entire body is smeared with butter and lard, as soon as he met the fire, he would turn into charcoal immediately. Hong Shui Flag can save the Damo Hall, they cannot save the Old Fangzhang.”

From the waist of the hill suddenly came a voice, “If Hong Shui Flag failed, there is still Hou Tu Flag.” It was Fan Yao’s voice. He had just finished speaking when he appeared with Hou Tu Flag Leader, Yan Yuan, on the peak, each holding the hand of an old monk walking between them. It was none other than the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Kong Wen. However, the three men’s clothes were scorched; their eyebrows were partially burned. They looked battered and exhausted.

Kong Zhi rushed forward to embrace Kong Wen. “Shixiong,” he called out, “Are you well? Shidi is incompetent, I am guilty and deserve ten thousand deaths.”

Kong Wen smiled and said, "If not because of these Fan Shizhu [benevolent master, donor] and Yan Shizhu came out from the tunnel, you and I would have to say goodbye to each other today."

Kong Zhi was astonished. "The Ming Cult's Hou Tu Flag's ability to dig tunnels is divine." He bowed deeply to Fan Yao and Yan Yuan to express his gratitude, and then said, "Fan Shizhu, Laoseng [old monk - referring to self] was rude and offensive to you; please forgive me. Laoseng does not dare to go to the appointment at the Wan An Temple of Dadu."

When a Wulin character made an appointment for a martial art competition and ate his own words by not showing up, the loss of face he would experience would be ten thousand times worse than if he lost because of inferior skill. Kong Zhi was endlessly grateful toward Fan Yao for risking his life in saving his Shixiong's life; hence he was willing to break his own promise. These two men admired each other to begin with. After this incident, their respect for each other grew. From now on, they became the very best of friends.

Turned out Cheng Kun had made a comprehensive arrangement in advance. On the eve of the Great Heroes Assembly, he caught Kong Wen off guard and sealed his acupoint, and held him prisoner inside the Damo Hall. The Hall was filled with sulfur, firewood and other flammable material. Then he assigned his trusted aides to stand guard. He coerced Kong Zhi to do everything he commanded, or else he would set the fire and burn Kong Wen to his death. When things did not turn out the way he planned later, when everything did not happen as he anticipated, when he believed his plan had failed completely, he issued an order to his cronies to set the fire as his last gambit to 'break the cauldrons and sink the boats'. He was hoping that when the

crowd of heroes and monks were busy putting off the fire, his cronies might have a chance to help him escape down the mountain.

Unexpectedly, Yang Xiao and the Ming Cult army arrived at the Shaoshi Peak a few days early. The Hou Tu Flag was immediately ordered to dig a tunnel toward the Shaolin Temple, originally, it was to rescue Xie Xun, but Xie Xun was not imprisoned inside the Temple at all.

As the Hou Tu Flag people looked everywhere with no avail, they took the opportunity to erase the writing on the back of the sixteen Luohan images. Later on, after Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo battled the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan, and Cheng Kun's real identity was revealed and he was confronted in front of Kong Zhi and everybody else, Zhao Min and Yang Xiao immediately guessed thru his plan.

After a short discussion, they asked Fan Yao to lead Hong Shui and Hou Tu, two Flags, to infiltrate the Temple and find Kong Wen. However, Cheng Kun's arrangement was extremely thorough and ominous; sulfur and firewood were piled high inside and outside the Damo Hall. As soon as a fire was ignited, the Hall caught in a blazing inferno, burning five Hou Tu Flag disciples to their deaths. Fan Yao and Yan Yuan moved quickly through the smoke and fire to rescue Kong Wen. Still, the three of them suffered some burns on their clothes, hair and eyebrows. If not for the tunnel, they would not escape and would be buried under the burning hall.

Damo Hall, as well as several adjacent buildings, suffered heavy damages from the fire. Fortunately the fire did not spread further, the Da Xiong Bao Dian [great heroic precious hall], the library, the Luohan Hall, and other important places did not suffer any damage.

After a short discussion, Kong Wen and Kong Zhi issued an order for Cheng Kun and his followers to be detained in the rear hall, waiting for further instructions. Cheng Kun had been staying in the Shaolin Temple for quite a long time, he had made a lot of friends and gathered quite a bit of followers, but as the leader was apprehended and the Abbot escaped from danger, Cheng Kun's supporters realized their cause was lost. They did not offer any resistance and were led down the peak by the monks, under the leadership of the Luohan Hall's chief monk, with their head hung low in dejection.

Zhang Wuji came near Xie Xun and could only call out, "Yifu!" while tears streaming down his face like rain.

"Silly Child!" Xie Xun laughed, "Your Yifu is enlightened by the three eminent monks and has passed through to great awakenings. My lifetime of crimes have been resolved, every single one of them. You should be very happy for me, why would you be grieving? Why would you feel sorry that I lost my martial art skill? Do you want me to use it to do evil again in the future?"

Zhang Wuji could not think of anything to answer, but there was pain in his heart; he called out again, "Yifu!"

Xie Xun went toward Kong Wen and kneeled down saying, "Disciple's sin is grave, I hope for Fangzhang to offer a shelter by taking me under your discipleship."

Kong Wen had not answered when Du E said, "Come, let Laoseng take you as my disciple."

Xie Xun said, "Disciple does not dare to hope for such good fortune." He asked Kong Wen to be his master, because then he would be a 'Yuan' generation disciple. If he entered Du E

tutelage, then he would have a 'Kong' generation rank, which was at the same level of seniority with Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two martial brothers.

"Rubbish!" Du E barked, "'Kong' is empty, 'Yuan' is also empty. I would have thought that you'd understand it by now!"

Xie Xun was startled, but he understood immediately. Master-disciple relationship was a mere distinction of the Buddhist title; it was all illusory for Buddhist followers. Thereupon, he recited a Buddhist verse, "Master is empty, disciple is empty, no guilt no responsibility, no virtue no merit!"

Du E laughed out loud and said, "Shanzai, shanzai! You have become a disciple of our school, yet you are still called Xie Xun. Do you understand?"

"Disciple understands," Xie Xun replied, "Xie Xun is ox dung. Everything is but a shadow, the body does not exist, let alone a name?"

Xie Xun was skilled in both pen and sword [orig. 'wen wu cuan cai'], there wasn't any 'zhu zi bai jia' [lit. many sages, hundred schools, a general term for all the pre-Han schools of thought] he did not pry into. With a little enlightenment from Du E, he became aware of the essential meaning of Buddhism. Henceforth he entered Buddhism and eventually became an eminent monk himself.

"Enter the rest, enter the rest!" Du E said, "Only by comprehending the way one will avoid devil's traps!" Taking Xie Xun by the hand, he went down the peak unhurriedly with Du Jie and Du Nan following behind.

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Zhang Wuji, and the others bowed to

send them off. The Golden-Haired Lion King's name shook the Jianghu thirty years ago by doing countless deeds which offended the whole society. Today he entered the empty gate, there wasn't anyone among the crowd of heroes who did not sigh with mixed feelings. Zhang Wuji's heart was filled with joy mixed with sorrow.

Kong Wen said, "The presence of the heroes has brightened our humble Temple. We are ashamed that there was a sudden change in the Temple that we have offended many people and were not able to perform our duty as the host. The heroes from all over the world have gathered here. We do not know when we will meet again. Therefore, we would like to invite you all to stay in our Temple for a few more days."

The crowd of heroes went down the peak to enter the Temple. Shaolin Temple prepared vegetarian banquet for the guests. The monks immediately performed a religious ceremony on behalf of the heroes who were unfortunate to lose their lives during the great assembly. One by one the crowd of heroes also offered sacrifices to express their condolences.

As the important matters were resolved, there remained many unclear businesses in Zhang Wuji's heart. Since Xie Xun left in a hurry, he did not have time to inquire about doubts and suspicions troubling his heart. He only had a feeling that the key to this mystery was somewhat related to Zhou Zhiruo. Thinking about their former relationship, he felt that he did not need to scrutinize everything and thus damage her reputation.

After dinner, Zhang Wuji visited Shi Hongshi and the Beggar Clan elders at the western chambers to discuss important matters within the Beggar Clan. Suddenly a Ming Cult disciple rushed in with a report, "Jiaozhu, the Wudang Zhang Si Xia [fourth hero Zhang] has arrived. He has an important

matter to discuss with you.”

Zhang Wuji was startled, “Could it be that Tai Shifu has met some mishaps?” He quickly went out and walked toward the main hall.

He knelt down in front of Zhang Songxi, but did not see anything different on his expression, thereupon he felt relieved. “Is Tai Shifu well?” he asked.

“Shifu is well,” Zhang Songxi replied, “At Mount Wudang I received information that the Yuan cavalry, twenty thousand strong, is heading to the direction of Shaolin Temple. Obviously, they do not have good intentions toward the Heroes Assembly. Therefore, I come here in the middle of the night to inform you.”

“We must let Fangzhang know as soon as possible,” Zhang Wuji said. Two men immediately went to the rear courtyard and informed Kong Wen.

Kong Wen thought for a moment. “This matter implicates a lot of things; we must discuss it with the crowd of heroes.” Thereupon he ordered a monk to sound the alarm, inviting everybody to the Da Xiong Bao Dian.

As soon as they were alerted, the crowd of heroes discussed the matter at hand. The hot-blooded among them said, “While the heroes from all over the world gather here, let us go down the mountain to catch them off guard and slaughter them.”

The more experienced among them said, “The Yuan army is always on the move. Perhaps this is one of their routine relocation operations. They might not necessarily come to give us trouble.”

Zhang Songxi said, "I understand Mongolians; I heard it with my own ears the Tatar officer ordering his troops to attack the Shaolin Temple."

By that time, the Mongolians had been occupying the Central Plains for more than a hundred years; the number of Han people who understand Mongolian language was not small. Zhang Songxi was intelligent and experienced; he understood a considerable number of dialects from different towns and villages, and was quite fluent in Mongolian.

"Gentlemen Heroes," Kong Wen said, "It appears that the imperial court has found out about our assembly in here, and they decided our meeting is not beneficial to the imperial court, and thus they dispatch an army to suppress us. We are all martial art practitioners, and we are not afraid of the Tatars. We are ready to cope with anything, we will resist by whatever means available, we ..." He had not finished his speech when some people started cheering and clapping.

Kong Wen continued, "However, we are Jianghu's warriors who are accustomed to fight one on one; if not using a blade or fists and kicks, then using internal energy and secret projectiles. We are not experts in fighting on horseback or using long spear and double-ended lance. In Laoseng's opinion; how about the heroes go down the mountain and disband?"

The crowd of heroes looked at each other in silence. Zhang Wuji said, "If we go down and disband, first, the Tatars would think we are afraid of them and we will unavoidably crush the spirit of the people. Second, what will happen to the masters in the Shaolin Temple?"

Kong Wen smiled and said, "If the Yuan army come to the

Temple and only see a bunch of monks and not Jianghu warriors, they would certainly leave us alone. This is called 'arrive in high spirit, return in disappointment.'"

The crowd of warriors knew that Kong Wen said this out of his good intention. The crowd of heroes was invited by Shaolin Pai; of course they did not want their guests to face disaster and shed their blood on the Shaoshi Peak. But this crowd of heroes was all people of courage and uprightness; they would not flinch in front of the enemy, naturally, they were unwilling to leave. Besides, the imperial government had already dispatched their troops. They simply would not return empty-handed. They would definitely trouble the Shaolin Temple. Most likely, they would kill most monks and capture the rest, and then they would probably burn the Temple down. The Mongolian soldiers were well known of their brutality; killing and burning were not foreign to them.

Yang Xiao said, "The Tatars kill without mercy. It is the duty of all Han people to fight the enemy. In my humble opinion, we have no other choice but to fight. We must battle them someplace else so that this thousand-year ancient Temple will be spared of the catastrophe of war."

The crowd of heroes applauded in agreement. "Let it be so," they said.

When they were still talking, from outside the gate suddenly came the sound of hoof beats; two riders galloped near. The horses stopped with a neigh outside the door. Two men, ushered by the monk in charge of visitor reception entered the hall in a hurry. As soon as the crowd of heroes saw the riders' clothes, they knew these men were Ming Cult disciples.

The two men walked before Zhang Wuji, bowed in salute and one of them reported, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: Tatar vanguard

army of five thousand troops has arrived to attack Shaolin Temple. They say the Shifus in the Temple are gathering a crowd to rebel, so they are here to flatten Shaolin. All shiny ... shiny ...”

Kong Wen smiled and said, “You were about to say ‘shiny head monks’, weren’t you? Those words are not taboo. Please continue.”

The man said, “Along the way, the Tatars have killed many monks. The Tatars say: ‘Shiny heads are not good people, those with hair are also not good people; they all deserved to be put to death by the blade.’”

A lot of people raised their voices, they all said, “If we don’t fight a life and dead battle against the Tatars, we are ashamed to be the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.”

Although by that time the Song dynasty had been subjugated by foreign power for almost a hundred years, the mainstream heroes and warriors had always considered Mongolians soldiers and officers as barbarians. They were unwilling to be the foreigners’ subjects. This time hearing how the Mongolian troops went on a killing spree, their blood boiled and everybody wanted to go to battle.

“Gentlemen, the heroes,” in a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “Today is the day we, the Han men, kill the enemy to serve our country. The name of the Great Assembly of Shaolin Temple will go down the history for thousands of years!”

The Great Hall shook with the deafening cheers of the people.

Zhang Wuji continued, “We can’t go back now even if we

want to. I am asking Kong Wen Fangzhang to give us the order. We, the Ming Cult, from top to bottom will follow with all our hearts.”

“Zhang Jiaozhu, what are you talking about?” Kong Wen said, “Although our humble Sect’s monks have learned a little bit punching and kicking, we know nothing about marching in the army and going to war. In the last several years the Ming Cult has initiated such a great undertaking; who in the Jianghu has not heard about it? Only the Ming Cult has the resources to fight Tatars’ large army. We nominate Zhang Jiaozhu to hold the commander position and lead the heroes from all over the world to fight the Tatars.”

Zhang Wuji tried to decline modestly, but the crowd of heroes had already cheered loudly. It was true that Zhang Wuji was young and inexperienced, but his martial art skill was strong. His power in fighting the three Shaolin monks had been witnessed by everybody present. In addition, the success of Han Shantong, Xu Shouhui, Zhu Yuanzhang and the other Ming Cult generals in staging rebellions, attacking cities and capturing territories in such places as Huai Si River, Hunan and Hubei, and other areas had shaken the world. Earlier, the people had also seen the Five-Element Flags displaying their full capabilities in the arena. No other school or sect possessed these kinds of skills. The warriors from various sects and clans all agreed that nobody else fit to take such a big responsibility other than the Ming Cult.

Zhang Wuji said, “I [orig. zai4xia4] have never learned how to manage soldiers. Please elect other capable person to be in charge.”

While he was still declining modestly, from the foot of the mountain came the rumbling noise of people shouting and fighting. Two Shaolin monks rushed into the Hall and

reported, "Reporting to Fangzhang: the Mongolian army has attacked our mountain."

Zhang Wuji said, "Rui Jin, Hong Shui, two Flags, are going to be the first to engage the enemy. Mr. Zhou Dian, Tie Guan Daozhang [Priest Tie Guan ('hard hat')], you are to assist these two flags." Zhou Dian and Priest Tie Guan complied and quickly left.

The situation this time was so urgent that it did not allow Zhang Wuji to decline anymore. He had no choice but issue his orders: "Shuo Bude Shifu, please take my Sheng Huo Ling and go to our Cult's encampments in the surrounding area. Tell them to go up the mountain to lend their assistance." Shou Bude took the tablet and left.

As the crowd of heroes in the Great Hall heard about the Yuan's army arrival to destroy them, they drew their weapons and rushed out.

"Jiaozhu," in a low voice Yang Xiao said, "If you don't take command, these people will fight randomly, and they will certainly be defeated."

Zhang Wuji nodded and ran out the Hall. He went to the pavilion halfway down the mountain and saw thousands of the Mongolian vanguard troops had arrived at the waist of the mountain. The Rui Jin Flag drove them back down by a salvo of arrows and javelins.

As far as eyes could see, the Mongolian troops were creeping up; their power looked so intimidating. Although their prestige was far below Genghis Khan's army, whose power overawed foreign lands, the Mongolian cavalry, after all, was very well trained and was still holding their reputation as unmatched elite troops.

Suddenly from the left came loud shouts as a large number of nuns, men and women ran up the mountain. They were the Emei Pai contingent, which was on their way down the mountain when they met the Mongolian army and was driven back up. About a dozen or so men were carrying stretchers and other things. They were surrounded by the Mongolian soldiers.

Leading Jing Xuan, Jing Zhao, and several other senior disciples, Zhou Zhiruo charged and killed the enemy. But although they had killed dozens of Mongolian officers and soldiers, they still could not penetrate the enemy's siege and save their fellow disciples.

"Not good!" Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, "One of the stretchers must be carrying Song Shige!"

"Hong Shui, Lie Huo, two flags, cover us!" he shouted, "Fan and Yang two Emissaries, Wei Xiong [brother Wei], follow me to save people!" He jumped and rushed down.

Two Mongolian soldiers thrust their lances straight toward him. With one hand Zhang Wuji grabbed one lance; exerting his strength he shook the lance and the two Yuan soldiers were thrown down the mountain. He turned the lance over and like a pair of dragons diving into the sea, the pair of lances plunged into the crowd.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, and the others followed. The Mongolian soldiers scattered and a passageway has opened behind Zhou Zhiruo's group.

Fan Yao threw a punch, crushing the face of a Yuan army's Shi Fu Zhang [leader of a ten-man unit]. He then snatched the person on the stretcher and turned around to leave.

Zhang Wuji saw that Zhou Zhiruo's body and face were covered in blood; he charged back into the Yuan soldiers' encirclement. "Zhiruo, Zhiruo!" he called out, "Song Dage is saved!"

Zhou Zhiruo did not pay him any attention; she kept wielding her whip and charged ahead, but the mountain pathway was too narrow. Moreover, it was crammed full of soldiers so that after a while she could not charge anywhere anymore. Zhang Wuji saw two more Emei disciples carrying another stretcher were being caught up in the encirclement; they were brandishing their swords in a desperate struggle against the Yuan army.

"Looks like Song Shige is on that stretcher," Zhang Wuji thought. Dodging an attack, he jumped into the encirclement. He pulled two spears, which hit the rock wall and stuck, and then moving his hands and feet, he used the spears as stilts. When he was still a little more than a 'zhang' away, he saw the two Emei disciples were hit one after another by a saber and an arrow. They fell and both disciple and the stretcher rolled down the mountain. Zhang Wuji flew in; with the spear in his left hand he stopped the stretcher. He saw the person on the stretcher was wrapped in plain cloth from head to toe; only the face was exposed. It was indeed Song Qingshu.

Zhang Wuji threw the spears and carried Song Qingshu horizontally in his arms. He was surprised to feel Song Qingshu was exceptionally heavy. Apparently, there was a hard and stiff object inside the plain cloth wrap. Zhang Wuji did not have time to think about it, he was afraid that all this twisting and turning would break Song Qingshu's skull. Dodging to the left and evading to the right, he tried to stay away from the rain of sabers and spears of the Yuan cavalry, while keeping his steps exceptionally smooth and stable.

Tang Wenliang and Zong Weixia of Kongtong Pai charged together, protecting Zhang Wuji on either side. Their pair of swords stabbed and blocked, the Yuan troops fell one by one under their swords. Carrying Song Qingshu in his arms, Zhang Wuji made a steady progress going up the mountain. Several hundreds of Yuan soldiers arranged themselves in formation.

“Lie Huo Flag, move to action!” Peng Yingyu called out.

The Lie Huo Flag men spurted oil from their spray guns, followed by shooting the rockets one by one. Raging flames rolled in waves, burning more than two hundred Yuan soldiers. Their burning bodies rolled down the mountain like balls of fire.

On the other side, the Hong Shui Flag’s hoses belched out poisonous water, spraying several hundred Yuan troops. The dead and the injured scattered on the mountainside. The Yuan army’s Wan Fu Zhang [leader of ten-thousand-man unit] ordered his troops to retreat. The front end of the formation changed into the rear. Shooting the arrows to prevent the enemy from pursuing, the army drew back slowly.

Peng Yingyu sighed and said, “Although they are defeated, the Tatars army does not get chaotic. They are truly world caliber elite troops.”

The Yuan army withdrew to the base of the mountain, and then spread out in a fan-shaped formation. It appeared they were not going to attack again, at least for the time being.

Zhang Wuji issued his order, “Rui Jin, Hong Shui and Lie Huo, three flags to defend the major road going up the mountain.

Ju Mu and Hou Tu, two flags to quickly cut lumber and construct barriers to guard against the enemy attack.”

All the Five-Element Flags leaders accepted the order in one voice, and then went separate ways to lead their people laying out a defense.

Previously, the crowd of heroes thought that although they might not be able to completely kill Tatars troops, defending themselves certainly would not be too difficult, would it? However, in the battle just now they experienced the power of the Yuan army first hand. Now they realized that large-scale battle was substantially different than fighting one-on-one in a martial art competition. With thousands upon thousands soldiers surging in like a tide of people, even someone excelled in martial art like Zhou Zhiruo would not have the opportunity to unleash her full potential. In a forest of sabers, spears, swords and lances, where everybody was chopping and killing everybody else, the skill they learned in normal time, be it weaponry or bare fist bare foot, internal or external strength, everything lost its usefulness. If the Ming Cult's Five Element Flags did not use troops formation to fight troops formation, at this moment there would be wretched mourning on the Shaoshi Peak; while the Shaolin Temple would turn into charred rubble under the raging fire.

Actually, Shaolin monks were also following some kind of discipline. They were divided into teams of younger monks, armed with monk staves and sabers, under the leadership of more senior monks. These teams spread out all around the Temple to guard all strategic locations. However, their number was simply too small; it was impossible for them to withstand the attack of twenty-thousand Mongolian elite troops.

The crowd of heroes broke into discussion with one another

as they saw Yuan army retreat. Now they understood why the previous dynasty, which was defended by a large number of heroes and warriors with superior martial art skill, was still unable to prevent their 'river and mountain' ['jiang shan' - country] from falling into the Tatars' hands.

Zhang Wuji gently placed Song Qingshu on the floor and looked for his breath. Luckily, he was still breathing. Turning his head, he wanted to talk to Zhou Zhiruo, but he did not see her anywhere.

"Where is Mrs. Song?" he asked. But everybody was busy fighting the Yuan force; nobody paid any attention to where Zhou Zhiruo was going. By this time, Emei Pai disciples' hostility toward the Ming Cult had been reduced substantially, yet they also said that they had not seen their Sect Leader.

Zhang Wuji was afraid that Song Qingshu's injury had worsened in the confusion of the battle just now; he decided to take off the wrapping on Song Qingshu's body and examine him carefully.

There were three layers of wrapping cloth on Song Qingshu's body. By the time Zhang Wuji had loosened the second layer, 'clang, clang, clang,' four pieces of broken weapon fell down. Zhang Wuji was startled. "Tulong Saber, Yitian Sword!" he called out.

One after another the crowd of heroes came near and stood around him. They saw the blades of both the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword were broken into two parts each. Zhang Wuji picked the half Tulong Saber, which still felt rather heavy in his hand. At that moment, all sorts of feeling welled up in his heart. He remembered his own parents lost their lives because of this Saber. For the last twenty years or so the

Jianghu was in continuous trouble, all because of this Saber. The primary intention of the crowd of heroes gathered in Shaolin was also for this treasured saber. He could not imagine that this Saber suddenly reappeared broken and turned into a useless thing.

As he lifted the Saber closer, he noticed that the broken part was hollow; large enough to conceal something. The Yitian Sword was also hollow. However, both holes were empty. Someone must have taken whatever object that was previously hidden inside.

Yang Xiao sighed, "Turned out Miss Zhou's astounding martial art skill came from these Saber and Sword."

Looking at the appearance of the broken sections of the Saber and the Sword, Zhang Wuji suddenly realized that when the Saber and the Sword went missing on that little island, they were taken by Zhou Zhiruo. Somehow she managed to banish Zhao Min, kill Yin Li, and strike the Saber and the Sword to each other, and thus two sharpest weapons in the world gave up and broke. She then took the concealed secret martial art manual and trained surreptitiously.

"That's right," he thought. The more Zhang Wuji thought, his mind grew clearer, "On that island, when I tried to use the Jiu Yang Shen Gong to drive the poison out from her body, I felt a strange internal energy vaguely resisting my strength. Later, this strange energy grew stronger. Obviously her internal energy cultivation has made some advancement. Ay! Because of her impatience to get a quick result, she did not cultivate a strong internal energy foundation, but took a shortcut by training a ruthless and evil martial art skill. In the end, she will not be able to reach the perfection of the martial art study. She had defeated Yu Er Bo and Yin Liu Shu, but it was because she was relying on strange moves, thus

gaining the advantage of surprise, just like when I was defeated under the Central Cult's Wind and Cloud, three Emissaries' hands in the past. Zhiruo's real skill is still far inferior to Yu and Yin, two uncles. If they fight again in the future, she will certainly die under the hands of Wudang Heroes ..."

When he was still deep in thought, the Rui Jin Flag Leader, Wu Jingcao stepped forward and said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: your subordinate came from a blacksmith family. I have learned how to forge metal into saber and sword. Let subordinate give it a try. Perhaps I can fix these treasured Saber and Sword."

Yang Xiao was delighted. "Wu Qishi's [flag leader Wu] skill as a swordsmith is unparalleled in the world. Jiaozhu, there is no harm in letting him try."

Zhang Wuji nodded. "It is indeed a pity that these sharp weapons are broken like this. Wu Qishi, you might as well give it a try."

Wu Jingcao turned toward the Lie Huo Flag Leader, Xin Ran, and said, "The most important ingredient in sword making is the fire. I will need Xin Xiong's wholehearted assistance. From the look of it, the Tatars will not going to attack the mountain for a while; what do you say we two brothers start working together rightaway?"

Xin Ran said with a laugh, "Making fire is actually Xiongdi's [brother, general term] expertise."

Thereupon the two of them ordered their subordinates to build a blast furnace, with an opening not more than one foot wide. Laying bricks, Wu Jingcao firmly clamped the top section of the Tulong Saber inside the furnace with the

broken end toward the fire. There were all kinds of fuel and flammable materials in the Lie Huo Flag that in an instant the furnace was blazing hot with raging fire.

Wu Jingcao had lost his right arm, only his left arm was left. He arranged a dozen or so swords and sabers by his side. His eyes were fixed on the fire. Each time the fire changed color, he put a blade inside the furnace to test the strength of the fire. When the fire turned from blue to white, his left hand quickly grabbed a pair of steel pliers and pinching the other half section of the Tulong Saber, he joined it with the top section, and held it in the fire. He was bare-chested; sparks landed on his body, but he seemed oblivious, his attention was focused completely on the task at hand.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Although being a swordsmith is a humble occupation, it actually requires great knowledge and great ability. An ordinary blacksmith would not be able to endure even this blistering hot furnace."

Suddenly, 'bonk, bonk', the two Lie Huo Flag men who were pumping the bellows fainted and fell on the floor. Xin Ran and the Lie Huo Flag's Vice Flag Leader quickly stepped in. They pulled their two fainted men and then took their place in pumping the bellows. These two men's internal energy cultivation was not bad; as they exerted their strength, blast of air made the fire inside the stove blazing high, reaching about a 'zhang' above the smokestack, creating quite a spectacle.

About half the time to burn an incense-stick later, Wu Jingcao suddenly cried out, "Aiyo!" and jumped backwards with disappointment on his face. Everybody was stunned; when they looked at his hand, they saw the steel pliers in his hand had melted and deformed beyond recognition, while the Tulong Saber did not show the slightest bit of melting.

Wu Jingcao shook his head and said, "Subordinate is incompetent; this treasured Tulong Saber's reputation is truly justified."

Xin Ran and his second in command stopped pumping and stepped aside. Their clothes were soaking wet with perspiration, as if they had just swam in the water fully clothed.

"Wuji Gege," Zhao Min suddenly said, "Wasn't even the Tulong Saber not able to chop the Sheng Huo Ling tablets?"

"Ah, that's right!" Zhang Wuji said.

Out of six Sheng Huo Ling tablets, one was taken by Shuo Bude going down the mountain to call for reinforcement; there were still five tablets left. Zhang Wuji took these five tablets and handed them over to Wu Jingcao, while saying, "If the Saber and the Sword cannot be fixed, that's all right. Sheng Huo Ling is our Cult's most precious object. We simply must not damage it."

"Yes!" Wu Jingcao replied, while bowing down to receive the tablets. He looked at the five tablets and noticed that the tablets were made neither of steel nor iron; they were hard like nothing he had seen. He estimated the weight to be about more or less a catty [approx. 1 lb or 0.5kg]. Lowering his head, he pondered deeply.

"If you are unsure, you don't have to take a risk," Zhang Wuji said.

Wu Jingcao did not reply. After a while, he awoke from his deep thought and said, "Subordinate did not promptly reply, begging Jiaozhu's pardon. This Sheng Huo Ling was cast

using 'bai jin, xuan tie' [lit. white gold - platinum, black/mysterious iron (same material as Yang Guo's heavy sword)], blended with 'jin gang sha' [lit. very hard steel (or diamond) powder/granule] and other materials; ordinary blaze would not smelt it. Subordinate was pondering deeply how it was made in the past. It was truly unthinkable; thereupon I was lost in thought for a while."

Zhao Min cast a sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji. Pursing her mouth, she laughed and said, "When Jiaozhu needs to go to Persia to meet with a certain important character in the future, you can go with him to consult their master artisan."

Zhang Wuji was bashful. "Why would I want to go to Persia?" he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Do I have to spell it out in front of everybody?" To Wu Jingcao she said, "Have you looked? There are engravings of characters on the Sheng Huo Ling. If sharp weapons like Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword cannot damage it the least bit, what kind of tool did they engrave the characters with?"

"Actually, to engrave the characters is not difficult," Wu Jingcao replied, "You can apply a layer of white wax [here's from the dictionary: white wax from Chinese white wax bug] to the Sheng Huo Ling; and then engrave the characters on the wax. Next, apply a strong acid. Within several months, the acid will corrode the tablets. When the white wax is scraped, the characters stay on the tablets. What Xiao Ren [humble one, lowly one - referring to self] do not understand is how the metal was cast."

"Hey," Xin Ran called out, "Are we going to do it or not?"

"Jiaozhu, set your mind at ease," Wu Jingcao said to Zhang

Wuji, “Although Xin Xiongdi’s raging fire is fierce, it will not damage the Sheng Huo Ling the least bit.”

Xin Ran, however, was apprehensive, “I will make every effort to fan the fire, but if it burns our Cult’s most precious object, I may take the blame.”

Wu Jingcao smiled and said, “I don’t think you have the ability to do so. But even if you do, I will take the blame.” Thereupon he used two Sheng Huo Ling tablets to clamp the half section of the Tulong Saber, and then took a new pair of pliers to grip the Sheng Huo Ling tablets and returned the treasured Saber into the furnace.

The fire was blazing hotter and higher. After burning continuously for more than an hour, Wu Jingcao, Xin Ran and the Lie Huo Flag’s Vice Flag Leader seemed to be beaten down by the heat; their faces showed signs of weariness, it looked like they would not be able to hold much longer. Priest Tie Guan signaled Zhou Dian with his eyes, while his left hand made a circle in the air. The two of them rushed forward to take Xin Ran and Lie Huo Flag’s Vice Flag Leader’s place in pumping the bellows. These two men’s internal energy was much higher than those two they were replacing; inside the furnace, a white flame rose straight up.

Suddenly Wu Jingcao shouted, “Gu Xiongdi [brother Gu], do it!” The Rui Jin Flag’s Vice Flag Leader rushed toward the furnace with a naked blade in his hand. A white ray flashed, the blade stabbed Wu Jingcao in the chest. The multitude faces of heroes watching from the side changed, they all cried out in shock. Blood spurted out from Wu Jingcao’s naked chest toward the Tulong Saber. As the blood met the fire, blue smoke rose gracefully.

“It’s finished!” Wu Jingcao shouted. He retreated several

steps and fell sitting down on the ground. There was a deep black big saber in his right hand. The two broken pieces of the Tulong Saber had been fused together into one piece.

Now everybody understood. Turned out when a swordsmith failed to forge a saber or a sword, they would drip blood on the blade. There was an old legend about a certain husband and wife, Gan Jiang and Mo Xie, who had to jump into the furnace before an extremely sharp weapon could be forged. With his action, Wu Jingcao might have followed a master artisanship custom handed down from the ancient times.

Zhang Wuji rushed toward Wu Jingcao; he looked carefully at the wound, and saw that the saber only entered the flesh shallowly, the injury was not life threatening. Immediately he applied cut wound medicine and wrapped up the wound, while saying, "Wu Xiong, why did you do this? It's not important whether this Saber can be fixed or not. Why did Wu Xiong have to suffer such pain?"

"What's the big deal about this superficial wound that it has caused Jiaozhu anxiety?" Wu Jingcao replied. He stood up and raised the Tulong Saber to take a closer look. Upon seeing that the broken part was mended flawlessly with only a faint trace of blood on it, he could not help but feel very proud.

Zhang Wuji examined the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets, which were used inside the furnace and as expected, he did not see the slightest sign of damage. Receiving the Tulong Saber, he chopped it on two spears, which were snatched from Yuan troops earlier. With a light 'Swish!' sound, the two spears were cut smoothly, as if they were made of mud, cut by ordinary iron.

The crowd of heroes applauded loudly. "Excellent Saber!

Excellent Saber!" they praised.

Wu Jingcao took the two-piece Yitian Sword in his hands. His mind wandered to the moment when the former Rui Jin Flag Leader, Zhuang Zheng, as well as dozens of his brethrens of the Rui Jin Flag, lost their lives under this Sword. He could not restrain tears from flowing down his eyes.

"Jiaozhu," he said, "This Sword has killed my Zhuang Dage. It has killed not a few of my good brothers. Wu Jingcao hates this Sword to the bone. I can't fix it. I am ready to accept responsibility for this offense." While saying that, his tears poured down like rain.

"That only shows Wu Xiong's 'yi qi' [loyalty, code of brotherhood]," Zhang Wuji said, "What offense are you talking about?" Taking the two pieces of the Sword, he walked toward Jing Xuan of Emei Pai and said, "This Sword originally belonged to your precious Sect. I would like to ask Shitai to pass this on to Miss ... to Mrs. Song." Jing Xuan did not say anything, but she accepted the two pieces of broken sword.

Zhang Wuji held the Tulong Saber in his hand; he thought for a moment and then brought the Saber to Kong Wen.

"Fangzhang," he said, "This Saber was my Yifu's. Now that Yifu has entered the 'three precious' [orig. 'san bao' - Buddha, Dharma (his teaching) and Sangha (his monastic order)] and joined Shaolin, it is only fit that this Saber should be under Shaolin Pai's power."

Kong Wen shook both of his hands and said, "This Saber has already exchanged hands many times over. Last time it was Zhang Jiaozhu who snatched it away from among the thousand troops and ten thousand horses; everybody can

bear witness to it. And then it was Wu Dage from your precious Cult who mended it. In addition, today the heroes from all over the world have agreed to elect Zhang Jiaozhu to preside over the honorable position. Therefore, it is a question of ability and virtue, of origin and relationship, of prestige and position, this Saber should be under Zhang Jiaozhu's control. This is perfectly justified."

The crowd of heroes echoed in chorus; they said, "This is the will of the people, Zhang Jiaozhu does not need to decline."

Zhang Wuji had no choice but to accept; he thought, "If I can command the heroes of the Wulin world with this treasured Saber, we can drive the invaders together and complete the big current task."

He heard somebody started to recite, followed by the multitude of heroes, "The most revered in the Wulin world, treasured Saber slaying the dragon, ruling everything under the heavens, no one dares to disobey!" The next line was 'Yitian [relying on Heaven] does not appear, who can match its sharpness?' but since everybody had seen the Yitian Sword was broken and was not going to be mended, nobody recited these last two sentences.

The Rui Jin Flag of the Ming Cult harbored a deep hatred toward the Yitian Sword. Today, seeing the Tulong Saber was restored to its original form while the two pieces of Yitian Sword stayed broken, they all expressed their delight.

Everybody had been busy for half a day; their stomachs were growling. The Ming Cult's Five Element Flags and half of the Shaolin Temple monks were dispatched to guard all vital points. The rest of the people followed the monks to enjoy vegetarian dishes inside the Temple.

As the sky turned dark, Zhang Wuji leaped onto a tall tree to scout the enemy's movements at the bottom of the mountain. He noticed a cluster of encampments to the west, where smoke was rising up everywhere; it looked like they were cooking their dinner on the fire pits dug on the ground.

Zhang Wuji leaped down the tree and said to Wei Yixiao, "Wei Xiong, as soon as it is dark enough, go down and spy around the enemy's camp. Find out whether they are going to attack tonight or not." Wei Yixiao received the order and left.

"Jiaozhu," Yang Xiao said, "After being defeated at the front of the mountain today, I think the Tatars will not attack again tonight. What we must guard against is their sneak attack from the back of the mountain."

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "I am asking Yang Zuo Shi and Fan You Shi to stay and take charge in here, while I am going to the other side of the mountain to look around."

"I am coming with you," Zhao Min said.

The two of them went to the peak where Xie Xun was held captive; they looked far toward the back of the mountain, but did not see anything astir. Zhang Wuji ran his fingers gently on the three broken pine trees, and then he looked at the dark mouth of the dungeon, while in his mind he replayed the fierce fight earlier that day. He shivered at the thought of extremely dangerous situation he was in. Suddenly he remembered something, "Yifu told me to look at the rock wall of the dungeon. I almost forgot."

"Min Mei," he said, "Stay up here and stand watch; I am going down to take a look."

Jumping down into the hole, he took a torch [orig. 'huo zhe' (lit. fire folded document) - folded paper used as torch] and lit a fire. By this time, the water inside the dungeon had receded, but the wall and the ground were still wet. He saw on all sides, the wall was full of pictures. The pictures were apparently engraved on the rock wall using a sharp rock. The lines were simple, yet graceful and rather vivid.

On the eastern wall, the drawing depicted three women. One was lying on the ground; one was kneeling next to her as if she was tending to the woman on the ground. The third woman's right hand was at the kneeling woman's bosom. Next to the picture were two characters 'qu yao' [fetching the medicine].

On the south side, there was a picture of a big ship. One woman was throwing another woman into the ship. The caption said 'fang zhu' [banish].

Cold sweats broke out on Zhang Wuji's forehead. "Turn out it really happened this way," he thought, "When Min Mei was attending to my Biaomei [younger female cousin], Zhiruo stole the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' from her pocket to be mixed in our food and drink. And then she threw Min Mei into the Persian ship and forced them to leave immediately. But why didn't she simply kill Min Mei? Hmm, perhaps if she left Min Mei's body behind, she would not be able to cover up her track, plus she could not shift the blame to her. That being the case, then Biaomei was also killed under her ruthless hands."

Just below the picture, a bit to the left, was another picture of two men. One was sleeping, the other, with a head full of long hair, was inclining his head to listen. Zhang Wuji was startled, "Turn out when Zhiruo was performing this bloody atrocities that cry out to Heaven, Yifu heard everything. The

Senior's self-control was indeed very strong; he did not reveal anything on the island. Ah, right. At that time Yifu and I were already drugged by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; our internal strength were gone. Our lives were in Zhiruo's hands. No wonder at that time Yifu adamantly said that it must be Min mei's doing, and that he was very indignant toward her. He knew I was naive and muddle-headed; if he told me the secret, I would inadvertently divulge it through my speech or my demeanor."

He saw the pictures were splattered with blood, a reminder of the bloody battle between Xie Xun and Cheng Kun during the day, making the pictures more forlorn and terrifying.

Looking at the third picture on the western wall, he saw Xie Xun was sitting, and Zhou Zhiruo was attacking him from the back. There was a crowd of beggars of the Beggar Clan lurking outside the room. This scene was exactly the same as was depicted in the tableau sponsored by Zhao Min during the 'Tour of the Imperial City' at Dadu.

When he was about to look at the fourth picture, the torch in his hand suddenly went out. "Min Mei," he called out, "Could you come down and let me use your fire?"

Zhao Min lighted her torch and jumped down. As she saw the drawings, she understood immediately. The fourth picture depicted Xie Xun was being taken by several men. There was a woman peering from behind a tree in a distant. The stroke of these drawing was excellent; however, other than Xie Xun's own face, the other people's faces were indistinct, Zhang Wuji could not tell who the woman was.

He pondered about it for a moment and then he understood, "When Yifu became blind, I have not even been born yet. He recognizes Min Mei, Zhiruo, Biaomei, and me by our voices,

but actually he does not know what we look like. Naturally he could not draw our faces.” Pointing to the young woman, he asked, “Was it you, or Miss Zhou?”

“It was me,” Zhao Min replied, “When Cheng Kun snatched Xie Daxia away from the Beggar Clan, he had someone else to take Xie Daxia to be imprisoned in the Shaolin Temple. He himself went around leaving the Ming Cult’s mark along the way, leading you on a wild goose chase around a big circle. I did try to seize Xie Daxia by force several times, but I failed every time. In the end I had to stop you from being the bridegroom. I am truly sorry.”

At that time, Zhang Wuji’s heart was filled with extreme remorse. He stared blankly at Zhao Min, looking at her wan and sallow countenance, and her thin cheeks; knowing that in the last several months she had endured suffering beyond any normal person can bear. Overwhelmed by compassion, he reached out to embrace her, and said in a trembling voice, “Min Mei, I ... I have wronged you.” As soon as he embraced her, the fire went out and the dungeon turned into a pitch-black cave.

He continued, “If not because of your intelligence and quick-thinking, the muddle-headed Zhang Wuji would have killed you; wouldn’t that be terrible?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Do you have a heart to kill me? You insisted that I was the murderer, yet when you saw me, why didn’t you kill me?”

Zhang Wuji was silent with a blank expression on his face. After a moment, he sighed and said, “Min Mei, my feelings toward you have made me lose control over my own actions. Supposing you did kill my Biaomei, I still do not know what I should do. Now that the truth is being gradually revealed,

even though I feel sorry for Zhiruo, I must say that deep in my heart I am happy.”

Zhao Min could hear the sincerity in his voice; she leaned on his bosom. For a long time nobody said anything. When she looked up, she saw that the crescent moon was hanging low on the eastern horizon, while all around them nothing was astir.

“Wuji Gege,” Zhao Min said in a tender voice, “When we first met at the Green Willow Manor, we fell into the dungeon together. Don’t you think our circumstance today is more or less the same as the one we were then?”

Zhang Wuji snickered. He reached down to grab her left foot and then took her shoe off.

Zhao Min laughed. “A big man like you bullying a weak girl like me,” she said.

“You, a weak girl?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You are so crafty that even ten grown men are not your match.”

“Thank you for your praise, Zhang Da Jiaozhu [Big Cult Leader Zhang]!” Zhao Min laughed, “Little girl does not dare to accept.”

Speaking to this point, both of them broke out in laughter. The exchange between them was exactly what they were saying when they were trapped in the Green Willow Manor’s dungeon together a few years ago. Only, the first time they said that, the words were filled with hostility, while this evening, the words were full of unbounded tender love.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “Aren’t you afraid I might scratch the bottom of your foot again?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “No, I am not!”

Zhang Wuji grabbed her foot again, but suddenly they heard faint shouts from the direction of northwest. Leaning their heads to listen, they heard clashing gusts of wind; obviously, there were people fighting in the distance.

“Let’s go take a look!” they said to each other.

Taking Zhao Min’s hand, Zhang Wuji leaped up from the dungeon. Following the direction of the noise, they saw three shadows speeding away to the west. Their feet were exceptionally swift; they were definitely first class martial art masters. Zhang Wuji held out his arm to grab Zhao Min’s waist, and then unleashing his ‘qing gong’ he dashed on a chase. From the distant he noticed that the one in the front was running away, while the other two in the back were pursuing vigorously.

Zhang Wuji picked up his speed trying to close the distance. Under the moonlight he saw that the pursuers were two old men. They were none other than Lu Zhangke and He Biweng. He saw He Biweng wave his left hand, throwing a crane-beak pen forward toward the one in the front. The one in the front swept a sword backward to parry. ‘Bang!’ the crane-beak pen was thrown to the sky.

Because of this slight delay, Lu Zhangke was able to leap nearby that person, and immediately thrust his deer-antler staff forward. That person leaned sideways to evade and counterattacked with a palm. The moon shone onto that person’s face. Her face was pale, her loose long hair fluttered in the wind. Turned out she was Zhou Zhiruo. Zhang Wuji was startled. Hastily he took Zhao Min and hid behind a tree.

He Biweng caught the crane-beak pen as it fell from the sky. He circled toward Zhou Zhiruo's left and launched a converging attack together with Lu Zhangke.

Clenching her teeth, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Why do you, two old ghosts, painstakingly chase me?"

Lu Zhangke replied, "Today we have seen it with our own eyes; Zhang Wuji of the Ming Cult managed to seize the Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword, but the secret martial art manual inside the Saber and the Sword was already gone. It must be in Mrs. Song's possession."

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "Turned out when I was snatching the blades and saving others, these two old chaps were close by. But why couldn't I know their presence?"

He heard Zhou Zhiruo say, "There is indeed a secret martial art manual, but I destroyed it as soon as I finished training."

With a cold laugh Lu Zhangke said, "Did you say 'finished training'? That easy, huh? These Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword were known as 'the most treasured in Wulin world'; how can the secret hidden inside them be that superficial? Although Mrs. Song's martial art skill stands out above the others, I don't think you have reached the pinnacle yet. Otherwise, with one wave of your hand you would have killed us, two brothers. Why would you run away?"

"If I said I have destroyed it then I have destroyed it," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Who has so much spare time to chat with you? I am taking my leave now!"

"Hold it!" Lu Zhangke and He Biweng shouted together. They raised their hands at the same time and attacked Zhou Zhiruo from left and right.

Zhou Zhiruo brandished her sword; it looked like a silver snake dancing wildly under the moonlight. The Xuan Ming Elders parried her attacks with a staff and a pair of pens.

Zhang Wuji had seen Zhou Zhiruo's whip technique. This time he saw that her sword emits a mysterious ray, moving in and out in defense and offense in the midst of two martial art masters' converging attack. Her stances irregularly varied between fake and real; it seemed like her movements were full of tricks.

After fighting for more than several dozens stances, Zhou Zhiruo's sword moves were growing even stranger. At least seven of the ten stances were swift and fierce offensive strikes. Zhang Wuji knew that she wanted to get away from the enemies, but her internal energy would actually deplete faster by fighting like this. If she were a bit careless, she would face a mortal danger. Zhang Wuji was deeply concerned. He stepped out from behind the tree and quietly walked several steps closer.

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo let out a shout and swiftly stabbed Lu Zhangke three times. Lu Zhangke stepped sideways to evade. Right this moment, He Biweng threw his pair of pens toward her back with a full force. The pens clashing with each other midair and changed course; one flew towards the back of her head, the other flew towards the back of her waist.

Zhou Zhiruo heard the wind of the weapons behind her back and ducked; but she did not expect the pens would collide in midair and change their courses. As she ducked, one pen struck her forehead. Needless to say, she could not avoid the crane-beak pen threatening her waist.

Hastily Zhang Wuji leaped to catch the crane-beak pen, while sweeping his palm horizontally toward He Biweng. In her shock, Zhou Zhiruo was at a loss for a split second, and Lu Zhangke's palm came floating lightly toward her lower abdomen. It was not a small matter, as it was the 'xuan ming shen zhang' [black/mysterious divine palm]. Zhou Zhiruo stopped breathing and fainted at once.

Zhang Wuji was greatly shocked; throwing the crane-beak pen in his hand, he reached backward to catch Zhou Zhiruo, and then leaped more than a 'zhang' backwards.

"Xuan Ming Er Lao!" he roared, "Don't you have any face?"

Lu Zhangke laughed out loud and said, "I was wondering who dares to come and meddle with our business; turns out it is Zhang Da Jiaozhu [great cult leader]. Where is our Junzhu Niangniang [princess]? Where did you take her after kidnapping her?"

Zhao Min stepped out from behind the tree; taking Zhou Zhiruo from Zhang Wuji's arms, she softly laughed and said, "Mr. Lu, you are head over heels longing after me; aren't you afraid Father might be angry with you?"

"Little witch," Lu Zhangke angrily said, "You sowed dissension between us, brothers. We have severed any relationship with your father early on. Why would Ruyang Prince being angry or not concern me?"

Seeing how Lu Zhangku struck a vicious blow to injure Zhou Zhiruo, and then spoke rudely to Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji also recalled how these two men had caused him countless sufferings with their 'xuan ming shen zhang' when he was a child; his old hatred was rekindled. In that moment, his blood was boiling inside his chest. "Min Mei, back off," he said, "Just looking at these two old chaps is making me angry. I must

fight them well today.”

Seeing that Zhang Wuji was barehanded, the two elders laid down their weapons and waited with focused attention.

“On guard!” Zhang Wuji shouted and launched the ‘lan qiao wei’ [seizing the bird’s tail] stance; his palms struck out together. This stance was part of the Taiji Fist technique, the movement was very slow, but the power behind it was from his Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

Although Taiji Fist is common for the later generations, not too many Wulin people were even aware of its existence at the time right after Zhang Sanfeng developed it. Lu Zhangke had never seen this kind of soft, seemingly powerless palm technique; naturally, he did not know what kind of trick was hidden in this palm attack. He was extremely afraid of Zhang Wuji, hence he did not dare to meet his palm and leaned sideways to evade.

Zhang Wuji turned around and with ‘bai she tu yan’ [white snake spitting words] his left palm struck He Biweng, while his right palm shook in and out randomly. He Biweng pointed his left hand index finger to the center of Zhang Wuji’s palm, his right palm swept diagonally down toward Zhang Wuji’s lower abdomen.

Zhang Wuji had fought the Xuan Ming Elders several times; he knew these two men were not his match. Compared to Du E and the other, the three monks whom he encountered in his most recent three battles, these two were a level below in terms of their depth in martial art skills. So if he wanted to defeat these two, he should have more than enough to spare. However, these two’s skill was, after all, not superficial. Therefore, Zhang Wuji did not dare to be reckless. He launched Taiji Fist to its fullest potential; creating circle after

circle, with Jiu Yang Shen Gong struck out from sometimes straight, sometime slanting circles.

The Xuanming Elders gradually felt the 'yang' energy burning fiercely; while the 'yin' and cold energy of their own 'Xuan Ming Shen Zhang' was frequently forced back by the opponent.

After fighting for more than a hundred stances, by chance Zhang Wuji turned around and saw two dark shadows shiver on the ground. The moon had cast its shadow on Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo. His heart skipped a beat. Zhao Min appeared to be shaking uncontrollably while she was fighting to keep Zhou Zhiruo in her arms.

"Not good!" Zhang Wuji was secretly alarmed, "After taking Old Lu's 'xuan ming shen zhang', I am afraid Zhou Zhiruo cannot withstand it. The energy cultivation she trained was 'yin' and cold in nature. Now that she received Xuan Ming Shen Zhang which is the world's coldest and most poisonous energy, cold on top of cold, apparently even Min Mei is not able to endure it." Thereupon he increased his effort to press Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke noticed the change in Zhang Wuji's fist technique; he guessed Zhang Wuji's intentions correctly. Leaping sideways to evade, he called out, "Shidi, surround him; that woman surnamed Zhou is having a cold-poison attack. Don't let him help her."

"Certainly," He Biweng replied. Leaping out of the circle, he picked up his pair of crane-beak pens and with the 'tong tian che di' [going through the sky and penetrating the earth], his pens smashed in from top and bottom.

Zhang Wuji smiled slightly and said, "With or without

weapons, it's all the same!" With a shout his palm struck; the gust of wind generated was so strong that He Biweng was gasping for breath.

Lu Zhangke reached back for his deer-antler staff and swept it toward Zhang Wuji's waist. Zhang Wuji successively changed his fist techniques; now he launched the thirty-six style (or form) 'long zhua qin na shou' [dragon claw 'grab and capture' or grappling technique] he learned from Shaolin Divine Monk Kong Xing, the 'fu qin shi' [zither playing form], 'gu se shi' [drum beating form], 'bu feng shi' [wind grasping form], and 'bao can shi' [destruction carrying form], all with very strong offensive power.

"This Dragon Claw skill is very well trained," Lu Zhangke called out, "Later on it will be very useful to dig a hole in the ground; no mistake about it."

"Shige," He Biweng replied, "Why do we need a hole in the ground?"

Lu Zhangke laughed, "That Miss Zhou is going to die; of course we need a hole to bury her!"

As he spoke, his attention was slightly divided; Zhang Wuji flew in and kicked his left leg. Lu Zhangke staggered. He quickly braced himself and brandished his deer-antler staff, creating a defense so tight that even the wind and the rain would not be able to penetrate.

Zhang Wuji turned his head to see Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo; he saw these two women were shaking even more violently. "Min Mei," he asked, "How do you feel?"

"Very bad!" Zhao Min replied, "I feel very cold!"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He thought for a moment and then understood. When Zhou Zhiruo was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang, as fierce as the 'yin' and cold energy was, it only attacked her, one person. But now even Zhao Min was feeling cold. He thought it must be because of Zhao Min's good intention that she transmitted her own energy to help Zhou Zhiruo resisting the cold. However, these two women's strengths differed considerably; Zhou Zhiruo's internal energy was also very strange, so strange that instead of helping her, Zhao Min's own energy was depleted.

Zhang Wuji moved his fists furiously, hoping that he would force these two Elders as quickly as possible. But the two Elders kept their distance; they moved to his front and to his back, but did not dare to fight him directly, as their intention was only to prolong the battle.

Zhang Wuji was getting impatient. "Min Mei," he called out, "Lay Miss Zhou on the ground, and do not hold her."

"I ... I can't," Zhao Min replied.

"What?" Zhang Wuji was puzzled.

"She ... her back ... is stuck to my palm," Zhao Min said. Her teeth chattered and her body swayed as if she was going to fall down any minute. Zhang Wuji was even more shocked.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," he heard Lu Zhangke say, "This Miss Zhou is very cruel; she is passing on the cold poison in her body into Junzhu Niangniang that Junzhu Niangniang is almost dead. What do you say we make an agreement?"

"What agreement?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Lu Zhangke said, "We stop fighting. We get the two books

from Miss Zhou, you get to save Junzhu Niangniang.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted. He thought, “These Xuan Ming Elders’ martial art is already this good; if they also train Zhiruo’s sinister martial art and then they do much evil, nobody will be able to control them.”

While still thinking, he turned his head to look at Zhao Min again and saw that a shade of greenish blue had already appeared on her jade-like beautiful white cheeks, while her face showed an extreme pain. Zhang Wuji took two steps backward and grabbed her right palm with his left hand. Immediately he transferred his Jiu Yang Shen Qi in steady stream via his palm.

“Attack together from the front!” Lu Zhangke called out. With a staff and a pair of pens, like a flurry of torrential rain the Xuan Ming Elders charged together.

Zhang Wuji was using most of his energy to save Zhao and Zhou, two women; he was unable to move his body, he only had one palm with which to block the enemy’s attack, so in an instant he found himself in a very precarious situation.

‘Rip’, He Biweng’s crane-beak pen cut a long slit on the pants on his left leg; blood immediately dripped out of his leg.

At first, Zhao Min was almost frozen stiff by the cold ‘yin’ chi from Zhou Zhiruo’s body; she felt as if her blood was slowly coagulating. As soon as the Jiu Yang Shen Qi flushed in, gradually her body warmed up. But as Zhang Wuji used his other palm to fight Xuan Ming Elders, he was straining just to make ends meet; consequently, his transfer of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi toward Zhao Min weakened. Zhao Min started to feel cold again.

‘Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!’ Lu Zhangke struck three times with his deer-antler staff, with the tip of the antler aiming toward Zhang Wuji’s eyes. Zhang Wuji raised his palm to parry, deflecting the head of the staff away. He Biweng rolled on the ground. The pen in his left hand launched the ‘cong xin suo yu’ [lit. ‘whatever you like’ or ‘do as you please’] toward Zhang Wuji’s waist.

Zhang Wuji was unable to evade; he had no choice but to use the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi trying to neutralize the pen’s strength. But He Biweng’s pen carried a tremendous force and Zhang Wuji did not have the confidence that he would be able to neutralize the incoming force. Suddenly a loud ‘Dang!’ was heard; his waist shook, but he did not feel any pain. Turned out by chance He Biweng’s pen hit the Tulong Saber hanging on his waist.

Zhang Wuji did not normally fight his opponent using any weapon. Even battling Du E, three monks, he only used Sheng Huo Ling tablets, which were not real weapons. He had never used a sword or a saber, and thus although the Tulong Saber was hanging on his waist, he had not thought of using it to fight the enemy.

This pen strike by He Biweng awakened him; with a loud shout his left leg kicked, forcing He Biweng to withdraw three steps back. He pulled the Saber out right when the deer-antler staff was stabbing again. Zhang Wuji swept his Tulong Saber. With a light swishing noise the antler from the staff fell down. Lu Zhangke was stunned. “Aiyo!” he cried out.

He Biweng’s pair of pens rolled in. Zhang Wuji swept the treasured Saber again. ‘Swish, swish!’ Two crane-beak pens broke into four pieces. Zhang Wuji turned the Saber around, creating a circle of black light. The Xuan Ming Elders did not dare to get close anymore; finally Zhang Wuji was able to

transmit his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi into Zhao Min's body.

With this infusion of full-strength energy, the critical condition of the cold Xuan Ming poison attack on Zhou Zhiruo has finally passed. However, when two different types of energy, yin and yang, intersect inside the body, especially if they were of different strength level, the strong would subdue the weak. After the cold Xuan Ming poison was repelled, Jiu Yang Zhen Qi also offset the internal Jiu Yin energy, which Zhou Zhiruo trained for.

After Zhou Zhiruo acquired the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing [Nine Yin Manual] hidden inside the Yitian Sword, she only trained surreptitiously in the night because she was afraid Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji might find out. But time was running out. Since she was unable to build a strong foundation by training the manual step-by-step, her internal energy cultivation was not too deep. Actually, she only trained the lower and easier-to-train sinister martial art from the Manual. When she was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang, she was thinking of transmitting the cold 'yin' chi to Zhao Min. When Zhang Wuji interfered, she only felt her entire body was enveloped with a warm and cozy feeling. As she felt the incoming energy grow, she wanted to take her body out of Zhao Min's palm; unexpectedly, as she struggled, she felt as if a whiff of very strong sucking force was holding her so that she was not able to escape. Before, she was sucking Zhao Min's palm with her back; now, her back was stuck on Zhao Min's palm. It was because of the difference in internal energy strengths. Zhou Zhiruo could not help but feel utterly shocked.

As Zhang Wuji was driving the cold poison out, he felt his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was flowing out, while from Zhao Min's palm continuously came an opposing cold chi. He thought the cold poison of Xuan Ming Shen Zhang had not been completely neutralized, so he kept increasing his power. He did not know

that with each part of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi he sent out, he neutralized one part of the Jiu Yin Zhen Qi Zhou Zhiruo had painstakingly cultivated.

Zhou Zhirou was groaning inwardly, but she must not say anything, since she knew that as soon as she opened her mouth, blood would immediately spurt out like crazy, her chi would be drained and she would die.

Zhao Min felt warm and comfortable; she laughed and said, "Wuji Gege, I am all right now. You can focus your attention to fight the Xuan Ming Elders!"

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji replied, and withdrew his internal energy.

Zhou Zhiruo felt as if she had just received pardon; she quickly pulled away from Zhao Min's palm. She realized that although the cold poison of Xuan Ming Shen Zhang had been completely repelled, her own Jiu Yin internal energy had also suffered a heavy damage. As soon as Zhang Wuji brandished the Tulong Saber to attack the enemy, she stretched out her five fingers to strike the crown of Zhao Min's head.

"Aiyo!" Zhao Min cried out loudly. She felt a severe pain on the top of her head, and thought that she was going to die this time. But she heard 'crack, crack' noise instead, as Zhou Zhiruo was groaning in pain and hurriedly retreated.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; hastily he turned his head and asked, "What is it?"

Zhao Min reached up to touch her forehead and was so scared that she felt her soul had left her and flown to the heavens that she was unable to say anything. Zhang Wuji only knew that she was hit by the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua'; he

was also scared out of his wits. With his right hand he brandished to Saber to block the two elders, with his left hand he felt the top of her head. He felt the stickiness of blood, but luckily did not find any broken bone. He felt as if a large boulder burdening his heart had just fallen down.

“It’s all right,” he said, consolingly, “Your wound is only skin deep.” While in his heart he mused, “Strange, very strange!”

He did not know that when Zhou Zhiruo attacked, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi he sent out earlier had not completely left Zhao Min’s body. Moreover, Zhou Zhiruo’s own internal energy had suffered substantial damage. When she attacked, not only she failed to harm the opponent, her own fingers experienced quite a shock.

As Zhang Wuji’s attention was diverted, the Xuan Ming Elders’ attack came by, but this time Zhang Wuji had the world’s sharpest weapon in his hand. Aware of the outstanding character of this weapon, he did not want to take advantage over the opponent, so he handed the precious saber over to Zhao Min instead. Quickly he circulated his breathing one round and focused his attention. Then, retracting his left hand, he thrust out his palm using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert He Biweng’s incoming palm.

This ‘pull and push’ was the most profound technique of the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; backed by concentrated power of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. This technique required the most amount of internal energy and could not have the slightest degree of negligence in its execution. If he failed, he would suffer fire deviation. For this reason he did not dare to use it earlier even though when faced with a desperate situation, because his mind was still occupied by trying to repel the cold poison from Zhao and Zhou, two women.

The Xuan Ming Elders were first class martial art masters; if he had used the fifth or the sixth level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he might not be able to deal with them. As He Biweng's right palm struck by, 'whoosh!' it changed course to strike Lu Zhangke's shoulder.

Lu Zhangke was startled and angrily said, "Shidi, what are you doing?"

Although He Biweng's martial art skill was high, his natural disposition was rather slow; he had to think for quite a while before he could understand anything. This time, things happened so quickly that he himself was baffled. In his shock, he was unable to give Lu Zhangke any explanation. He only knew that Zhang Wuji had played a trick on him. He thought that if he increased his effort in attacking the enemy, he might appease his Shixiong; therefore, sending out his strength to his right leg, he kicked Zhang Wuji, hard. Zhang Wuji's left hand whisked this kick, hooked He Biweng's leg and directed it toward Lu Zhangke's lower abdomen. Lu Zhangke was shocked and angered. "Are you insane?" he roared.

"That's right!" Zhao Min called out, "Mr. He, quickly capture this rebellious, lecherous, greedy and kinky Shixiong of yours, my Father will certainly reward you heavily."

Zhang Wuji secretly laughed. "This 'driving-a-wedge-between-them' idea is really marvelous," he mused. Originally, he wanted to use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert He Biweng's attack toward Lu Zhangke, and redirect Lu Zhangke's strike toward He Biweng. But as he listened to Zhao Min, he only diverted He Biweng's fists and legs, but used Taiji Fist to deal with Lu Zhangke.

"Mr. He, don't worry," he called out, "With our combined

effort, we will certainly be able to butcher this pervert deer [‘Lu’ of Lu Zhangke means ‘deer’]. The Ruyang Prince has already bestowed to you ... bestowed to you ...” In that instant, he could not think of an appropriate government position for him.

“Mr. He,” Zhao Min called out, “The official letter of your appointment to a high official position is here.” While saying that she took a bundle of paper from her bosom and waved it up, reading, “Hmm, it is ‘Da Yuan Hu Guo Yang Wei Da Jiang Jun’ [the Great Yuan’s Protector of the Country, Great General with Rising Power]. Hurry up, you must try harder!”

Zhang Wuji struck with his right palm, forcing Lu Zhangke to lean to the left; right at this moment, he diverted He Biweng’s left palm from attacking Zhang Wuji’s left to Lu Zhangke’s right, so that Lu Zhangke was attacked from left and right.

Lu Zhangke and He Biweng had been together for several decades; their love to each other was like blood brothers. At first Lu Zhangke did not believe that He Biweng would betray him, but at this moment he had seen it with his own eyes how He Biweng successively attacked him for five stances; all aimed at his vital points, all with full-powered punches or kicks, apparently with the desire to take his life, without the least bit of friendship. His resentment had reached its peak. He roared, “You are after riches and honor, and do not have any regard about ‘yi qi’?”

“I ... I am ...” He Biweng hurriedly said.

“That’s right,” Zhao Min cut him off, “You have no choice because you are going to be the ‘Da Yuan Hu Guo Yang Wei Da Jiang Jun’; therefore, you cannot say anything about offending your Shixiong.”

Zhang Wuji put his entire strength in his right hand and focused his entire attention to lead He Biweng's palm strike toward Lu Zhangke. 'Bang!' Lu Zhangke's shoulder was squarely hit. In his anger Lu Zhangke slapped backward, striking He Biweng's left side of his jaw that several of his teeth fell down.

He Biweng was already old; he only had several teeth left inside his mouth. Naturally, he cherished these remaining few teeth on his left cheek. Unable to restrain his anger, he shouted, "Shige, you really can't tell the good from the bad. I did not hit you on purpose."

Lu Zhangke was also angry. "Who started the fight?" he said. Although his knowledge was vast, he did not know that in this world there existed the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi with such a formidable power. He thought that based on the level of martial art skill He Biweng and he possessed, Zhang Wuji might be able to defeat them or even kill them, but never in his wildest dream would he expect Zhang Wuji to use such technique as 'borrowing strength to fight strength', reversing his partner's palm force to strike him. Therefore, he had never suspected he had fallen into Zhang Wuji's trick.

Venting up his frustration, He Biweng cursed, "Little bastard, you have played trick on me!"

"That's right!" Zhao Min called out, "You don't need to call him 'Shige', just call him 'Little bastard'."

As Zhang Wuji's left palm was pressing Lu Zhangke's palm power, his right hand diverted He Biweng's palm to hit Lu Zhangke's right cheek that his cheek was swollen immediately.

Noticing that Lu Zhangke was fuming; his eyes were red and his palm attacked He Biweng like crazy, Zhang Wuji knew his plan worked. “Mr. He,” he shouted, “I’ll leave this pervert deer into your hands.” His left foot kicked, he flew out of and took Zhao Min to leave. He saw the Xuan Ming Elders were still intensely fighting ‘you punch me, I kick you’ each other.

“Mr. He,” Zhao Min called out, “After you arrest your Shige, you may borrow the secret martial art manual from the Tulong Saber for a month. Quickly set up a great merit; don’t miss this good opportunity.”

Lu Zhangke was getting angrier; he attacked He Biweng without showing any mercy. These two men were of the same school; there was not much difference in their martial skill level [orig. ‘ban jin ba liang’ – half a pound is eight ounces]. It was hard to say when this kind of fierce battle would end.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min returned to the Shaolin Temple. Examining the top of Zhao Min’s head, Zhang Wuji saw that the injury was superficial. Suddenly he remembered something. “Min Mei,” he said, “Luckily you bring that bundle of paper; otherwise, Lu Zhangke would not believe.”

With a chuckle, Zhao Min took two bundles of thin papers from her bosom. She waved it in front of Zhang Wuji’s face and said with a laugh, “Can you guess what this is?”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “If you tell me to guess, I will never guess correctly in my lifetime. So, why would I want to take the trouble?”

Zhao Min placed the two bundles of paper in his hand. Zhang Wuji took a candle to examine the paper. He found out that it was not paper, but thin sheets of silk, as thin as cicada’s

wings. The sheets were densely populated with tiny characters, with each character as small as the head of a fly. The first bundle began with this line of four characters, 'wu mu yi shu' [Wumu Legacy; lit. 'the book (or letter) left behind by Wumu']. It explained the key in deployment of troops in a war, battle formation, and other fine points of military strategy.

Looking at the second bundle, he saw it started with these four characters, 'Jiu Yin Zhen Jing' [Nine Yin Manual; lit. 'nine yin (negative/feminine/moon) true/real scripture']. Inside were all kinds of mystical and strange martial arts. Flipping toward the end of the bundle, he found 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw] and 'Cui Xin Zhang' [heart destroying palm] among other things.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "You ... did you take all this from Miss Zhou?" he asked.

Zhao Min laughed. "When she was immobile, why can't I take advantage of her [orig. shun shou qian yang' - lead away a goat in passing']?" she said, "This kind of malicious martial art, I don't want to learn, but I do want to destroy it, since left in her hands it might be used to harm others."

Zhang Wuji browsed through the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. A few pages later, he realized that the lesson inside was very profound and difficult to decipher in a short while. He also knew that the martial art skill toward the end of the book was not malicious, he said, "The martial art in this manual is actually very deep. If trained properly, I believe ten, twenty years later, the result will not be a small matter. But if it is trained rashly, the result will be superficial. Not only it will harm others, but will inflict self injury as well." After pausing for a moment, he continued, "That Jiejie wearing yellow gown's martial art is obviously of the same school, yet her

movements were upright without any sign of maliciousness, very pure and honorable. It seems that her skill also came from this Nine Yin Manual.”

“She said something like ‘Behind the Mount Zhong Nan, the Tomb of the Living Dead, the Divine Eagle and Gallant Knights vanished from the Jianghu’, what do these four lines mean?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. “When we see Tai Shifu in the future, we will ask the Senior. Perhaps he could shed some light on this affair.”

They chatted for some time. After making sure that there was no change in troop activity at the bottom of the mountain, they went their separate ways to take a rest.

End of Chapter 39.

Chapter 40 - Didn't Know This Zhang Fellow was The Mr. Zhang

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo drew out her sword and pointed it toward Zhang Wuji's chest. "I am going to take your life today," she shouted sternly, "Yin Li's ghost is entangling me anyway. I will eventually get killed. I'd rather die together with you." While saying that, she raised her sword high, ready to stab it down into Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji woke up at daybreak the next morning, and immediately jumped up a tall tree to scout the enemy movement. The enemy camp was bustling with activity; it seemed that they were going to launch an attack.

"Min Mei!" Zhang Wuji called.

"Mmm ... what is it?" Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji hesitated before saying, "Nothing, I just love to call your name." Actually, he wanted to consult Zhao Min on how to repel the Yuan army, knowing full well that she was very resourceful; certainly she had some brilliant ideas. But then he thought, "She was a princess of the imperial court; she betrayed her father and brother to follow me. I think it is just too much to ask her to help me killing her fellow Mongolians." Hence, he stopped himself when the words were just on the tip of his tongue.

Zhao Min noticed the change in his countenance; she knew what he was going to say. She sighed and said, "Wuji Gege, you are able to empathize with my painful predicament; I don't have to say anything."

Zhang Wuji went back to his room with a troubled mind of not knowing what to do. Absentmindedly he took the two bundles of book Zhao Min brought last night. He read several pages of the Nine Yin Manual; he also took a glance on the

Wumu Legacy. Again, after reading several pages, he came across a title 'bing kun niu tou shan' five small characters [troops trapped on the Ox-head Hill]. His heart was moved. He read on and found that in this section, Yue Fei recounted his experience when his outnumbered troops were surrounded by the Jin army; how he escaped from the entrapment, how he deployed special force soldiers, how he launched a converging attack and seized an overwhelming victory, all kinds of plan explained in great details.

Zhang Wuji slapped the table, "The Heaven helps me!" he exclaimed. Slapping the book down, he started to think. The situation of this Shaoshi Peak was entirely different to the Niutou Hill where Yue Fei was trapped in the past; however, if he used the same tactics, there was no reason why he could not win by a surprise move.

His admiration grew as he pondered deeper; he thought that Yue Wumu was a Heaven-sent genius. Faced with such danger, an ordinary man would not think of such strategy. He also thought that troop's deployment was just like martial arts; if there wasn't any expert giving guidance, no matter how smart or how dull, one would not think of such plan.

Dipping his finger into the tea cup, he drew the Temple map on the table. Even though he was aware of the dangerous situation they were in, who can say that they would not be lucky and prevail against the enemy? Their side was few, the enemy was many; they would not be able to score victory by marching out in a neat formation and engage the enemy in an open battle.

Once his mind was set, he went to the Da Xiong Bao Dian [Precious Hall of Great Heroes] and asked Abbot Kong Wen to summon the heroes. In a short moment everybody had arrived.

Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "Presently, Tatar cavalry has gathered at the base of the mountain. Presumably, they will carry out a large scale attack soon. Although we have scored a small victory yesterday and have dampened their spirit, we will be hard pressed to withstand them if the Tatars pay no regards to their own lives and throng up the mountain. Zaixia [lit. under, the humble one] has no talent; it was by the heroes' graciousness that I am elected to hold this temporary position as the commander in chief. Today we are united against a common enemy. I am asking everybody to obey my command."

The multitude of heroes replied in one voice, "Please issue the order, we will follow, no one will dare to disobey."

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji said, "Wu Qishi [Flag Leader Wu], receive my order!"

Rui Jin's Flag Leader, Wu Jingcao stepped forward, bowed and said, "Subordinate is ready to receive the order." While he was thinking in his heart, "Jiaozhu issues his first order to me. It is truly a great honor. No matter what kind of danger I will have to face, I will risk my life in doing it."

Zhang Wuji said, "I assign you to lead your Flag brethren to uphold the martial law. Whichever hero or warrior does not obey my order, the Rui Jin Flag's lances and hatchets will be thrown into his body. This law applies both to seniors and elders of our own Cult, and other Wulin masters and seniors. No exception."

"Accept the order!" with a loud voice Wu Jingcao complied. He took a small white flag from his bosom and held it tight with both hands.

Both in terms of name and martial art skill, Wu Jingcao was

not considered a first class Jianghu warrior, so previously, nobody regarded him too highly. But since the Five-Element Flags demonstrated their invincible might the other day, the multitude of heroes all knew that wherever this small white flag in his hand landed, it will immediately followed by the 500 feathered arrows, 500 javelins, and 500 short hatchets. Even if your skill is as high as the heavens, you will become mincemeat instantly. Therefore, seeing him unfold the white flag, everybody's hearts shivered.

The reason behind this order was because when Zhang Wuji browsed through the Wumu Legacy, the first chapter started with, 'The way to the successful training of troops starts with strict discipline.' He knew these Jianghu warriors were proud people; each one was used to do what one thought right. Although individually they possessed strong martial art skills, fighting together, they were no different than a motley crowd. Without someone giving order to organize and restrain, forcing them to follow orders, there was no way they could resist the Mongolian elite troops. Therefore, his first order was to assign the Rui Jin Flag as the law enforcers.

Pointing his finger to the tall wall in front of the hall, Zhang Wuji said, "Gentlemen, Heroes, whoever excels in 'qing gong' and able to jump over that wall, please show your skill."

Among the crowd of heroes, there were not a few whose face appeared dissatisfied; they thought, "What is this immaterial talk about telling us to show off our jumping ability?" Some senior masters felt that he was showing contempt toward others; they were not pleased at all.

Zhang Songxi stepped out from among the crowd and said, "I can." And then he leaped over the wall and lightly landed on the other side of the wall. Wudang Pai's 'ti yun zong' [cloud stairs] 'qing gong' enjoyed quite a reputation throughout the

world. For someone with Zhang Songxi's ability, leaping this wall was as easy as blowing off dust. However, he was not showing off at all, it was only an honest demonstration because he was following order. Thereupon Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang and the other experts followed suit one by one.

Like butterflies flying over flowers the heroes jumped over the wall one after another. Some were showing off their 'qing gong' by performing all kinds of flowery styles midair. After more than four hundred people had leaped, it looked like nobody else would try.

This wall was indeed not low; without a good 'qing gong' it was not easy to leap over it. The multitude of heroes did not train the same martial art skill. Oftentimes they trained themselves well in fists and kicks or weaponry, so their 'qing gong' was ordinary. There were quite a number of Jianghu characters who made their names this way; naturally, they were not willing to show off their shortcomings.

Noticing that among these four hundred people there were about eighty to ninety Shaolin monks, Zhang Wuji thought, "Shaolin Pai truly lives up to its reputation as the number one school in Wulin. Just in 'qing gong' alone, they have many more masters than any other schools." Thereupon he issued his next order, "Yu Er Bo, Zhang Si Bo, Yin Liu Shu, the three Uncles are to lead these heroes excel in 'qing gong' to bluff the enemy. You are to pretend to be escapees from the Temple, make the enemy troops to pursue you, and when you get to the back of the mountain ..." And he detailed the next steps.

Wudang Pai's Yu, Zhang and Yin, three heroes accepted the orders. Zhang Wuji made further assignments: who would set up ambush, who would cut the enemy's rear flank, who

would engage them frontally, who would make flank attack, and so on; all in detailed arrangement.

Yang Xiao and the others noticed how he planned this ingenious tactic and deployed troop's formation to engage the enemy; everything was so clear and orderly as if it was all premeditated. They were all utterly impressed; nobody knew that he had used the military tactic legacy of Yue Wumu. Only, he modified it slightly because of different terrain and different troops.

Finished assigning tasks, Zhang Wuji finally said, "I am asking Kong Wen Fangzhang and Kong Zhi Shen Seng to lead gentlemen and ladies of the Emei Pai to take care of the injured and the dead." Since Zhou Zhiruo was not present, Emei Pai had no one to give leadership. Zhang Wuji was aware Emei Pai had deep resentment against him, so he felt it was inappropriate for him to give them direction. For this reason he asked Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two divine monks; both men of good moral standing and reputation to act as their leaders. Presumably, Emei Pai people would not refuse to be under their leaderships. Sure enough, hearing his order, male and female disciples of Emei Pai silently accepted it; no one open his or her mouth in dissent.

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, "Today, the warriors of the Central Plains are united to fight the Tatar invasion. Masters in charge of bells and drums of the Shaolin Pai, please beat the drums and ring the bells." The multitude of heroes responded with an earth-shattering cheers; they unsheathed their weapons in high spirit.

The Lie Huo Flag had transported the firewood amassed in the Temple out from its storehouses and piled it up in front of the Temple. They lighted it up and very soon flames and thick smoke rose up to the sky. The Hou Tu Flag had spread

silt on top of various halls in the Temple, where the Lie Huo Flag then stacked firewood on it. This way, when they lighted the firewood, the fire would not spread to the building below. Yet from a distant, the several hundred buildings in the Temple complex appeared to be burning.

From the base of the mountain, the Yuan army heard the bells and drums first, which sounded like emergency alarm; then they saw the raging fire up the mountain. "Not good!" they said to each other, "The 'man zi' [insulting term for south Chinese/southern barbarian] set the Temple on fire; they must be running away."

Leading more than 150 warriors excelled in 'qing gong', Yu Lianzhou rushed down the mountain from the left side of Shaoshi Peak. Before they even reached the waist of the mountain, Yuan troops had already made loud ruckus and lined up in formation to pursue. The crowd of warriors scattered in all directions, making it hard for the Yuan army to shoot them with arrows.

Zhang Songxi led the second group. Yin Liting led the third group. Each of them carried a large bundle on his back. The bundles contained either wooden planks or bundles of clothes. In the eyes of the Yuan troops, it appeared that they were abandoning the Temple, escaping with difficulty carrying valuables; but the bundles were actually shields against the Mongolians' arrows.

Because of the heavy smoke, the Yuan troops could not see clearly how many people were escaping. Thereupon they divided their forces into two groups; ten thousand soldiers pursued the escapees immediately, while the other ten thousand stayed in their original defensive position.

"Yang Zuo Shi," Zhang Wuji turned toward Yang Xiao, "The

Tatar General is quite knowledgeable of military tactic; he did not order the entire army to pursue. This might give us trouble."

"Yes," Yang Xiao replied, "They do give us reason to be concerned."

They heard bugles sound from the bottom of the mountain. Two thousand strong Yuan cavalry divided itself into two groups and advanced to the top of the mountain from left and right. The mountain roads were rugged, but Mongolian ponies were able to gallop fast, as if they were flying. With their long spears and iron armors, the troops' appearance was very impressive.

When the vanguard of the Yuan cavalry arrived at the pavilion halfway up the mountain, Zhang Wuji gave his signal. From either side of the road, Lie Huo Flag people closing in, crouching among the tall grass. As the two-thousand strong cavalry advanced about another hundred 'zhang's, Xin Ran let out a whistle; his troops immediately sprayed oil toward the enemy, followed by balls of fire, burning both horses and their riders. The horses neighed in fear and pain; most of them rolled down the mountain, creating a great chaos.

The Yuan troops discipline was very strict. As the front group was being defeated, the rear group did not budge. Under the command of their general, three thousand soldiers got down from their horses and marched forward to attack. Again the Lie Huo Flag shot their fire, burning several hundred troops. But with extreme force of will, the remaining troops were still marching on.

Tang Yang, the Flag Leader of the Hong Shui Flag waved a black flag; poisonous water spurted out. Next, the Hou Tu

Flag also shot poisonous sand, throwing the Yuan army into total disorder. Several hundred troops managed to advance toward the mountain peak. These soldiers were completely wiped out by the Rui Jin Flag and Ju Mu Flag.

From the bottom of the mountain suddenly came the sound of beating drums. Five thousand troops marched forward with large shields lined up in front of their bodies, creating a slowly advancing wall. This way, the fire, poisonous water and poisonous sand lost their effectiveness. Even gigantic logs rolled down by the Ju Mu Flag only managed to create a few gaps, which were quickly closed again.

Seeing this desperate situation, Abbot Kong Wen said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, please have everybody retreat quickly. We must preserve the vitality of the Wulin world of the Central Plains. Although we are defeated today, we will stage a comeback in the future."

In the midst of this anxiety, suddenly they heard rousing sound of metal drums from the foot of the mountain, followed by a rocket shot up to the sky. Battle cries rose up from all directions.

Yang Xiao was delighted. "Jiaozhu," he said, "Our reinforcement arrives!"

From the top of the mountain looking down, they could not see the situation at the foot of the mountain; but they saw the dust rose and they heard the shouts of the people and the neigh of the horses. Obviously, the incoming troops were numerous.

Zhang Wuji loudly called out, "The reinforcement has arrived; everybody, charge!" From the top of the mountain, the multitude of heroes charged downward with weapons in

their hands.

Zhang Wuji cried out again, “Gentlemen Heroes, kill officers first before killing the soldiers.”

The crowd of heroes echoed his cry, “Kill officers first before killing the soldiers!”

The Mongolian armed force was organized into teams. Every ten soldiers formed a ten-man unit. Every ten-man units formed a hundred-man unit. Likewise, they formed thousand-man unit and subsequently ten-thousand-man unit, following a layered chain of command. When they go to battle, it was just like the mind giving order to the arm, the arm giving order to the hand, the hand giving order to the fingers. If the two forces were battling against each other arrayed in formation, Zhang Wuji’s order to kill the officers first would be difficult to follow; but at this moment the Yuan army was scattered on the hillside. Although the Yuan army could be considered elite troops, the martial art skill of their officers, after all, was inferior to the heroes and warriors of the Central Plains. Soon several ‘qian fu zhang’ [leader of a thousand-man unit] and ‘bai fu zhang’ [leader of a hundred-man unit] were killed. The Mongolian troops were thrown into confusion.

Charging down the mountain, Zhang Wuji and the others saw fluttering flags at the base of the mountain. The one on the south carried a ‘Xu’ character, while the one on the north had a ‘Chang’ character. So they know that Xu Da and Chang Yuchun had arrived.

Xu and Chang, two men were originally stationed around the Huai Si River. This time they were just moving their troops to Henan when Budai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude arrived with the call for help. As soon as they learned about

their Cult Leader was besieged by the enemy at the Shaoshi Peak, they deployed their troops night and day. By that time, around the Henan and Hubei, the Ming Cult army had fought the Yuan army for several years; with both sides occupying overlapping regions. Since they were not too far away and left as soon as they received the news, they managed to arrive in less than two days.

Xu Da and Chang Yuchun had been in command over the Ming Cult army for a long time; moreover, their troops were large, so they were able to drive the Yuan army to the west in no time.

The other force of ten-thousand Yuan soldiers was pursuing the heroes who pretended to escape from the Temple toward the western valley. Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi and Yin Liting led several hundred warriors with outstanding 'qing gong' fighting and retreating into the valley. The Yuan army's 'wan fu zhang' [leader of ten-thousand-man unit] saw that the three sides of the valley were all steep cliffs; the valley looked dangerous. However, seeing the number of the enemy was small, he thought that even if the enemy prepared an ambush there, they should be able to deal with it. Thereupon he signaled with his hand to order his troops to pursue closely into the valley.

As Yu Lianzhou and the others arrived at the bottom of the cliff, they climbed on several dozens long ropes, which were prepared in advance. As the 'wan fu zhang' realized they had fallen into the enemy's trap, he quickly ordered his men to withdraw. To his shock, however, at the mouth of the valley they were driven back by volleys of fire, poisonous sand, arrows, and poisonous water; while the Ju Mu Flag dropped logs in abundance to seal up the entrance of the valley.

Meanwhile, the second defeated army was also driven to the

valley. As they saw there was no way out, they ran all over the mountain and valley, scattered to all direction. Zhang Wuji and Xu Da arrived in close succession. "What a pity!" they cried; if they had planned it properly in advance, the second ten thousand strong troops would also be driven into the valley and destroyed completely.

Zhang Wuji did not anticipate the Yuan army would divide themselves into two groups, he also did not expect the reinforcement would arrive amazingly quickly. After all, commanding troops in the battlefield was not the same as being a Cult Leader. Although the Wumu Legacy contained marvelous military strategy, in the end, it was not easy to reconcile between the theory and practice. If Xu Da and Chang Yuchun did not arrive on time, the Shaolin Temple would inadvertently meet its doom. The first ten-thousand strong Yuan army, which was trapped inside the valley, would also be eventually rescued by their allies.

Xu Da immediately ordered his troops to move dirt and rocks to seal the mouth of the valley. He also sent his archers to climb up the cliff. Occupying the higher position their arrows shot down like rain into the Yuan army below. The Yuan troops were surrounded by the valley walls, they were powerless to retaliate and could only hide underneath the mountain rocks.

Not too long afterwards, Chang Yuchun's troops arrived. He was extremely delighted to see Zhang Wuji after a long period of separation.

"Remove the dirt and the rocks," Chang Yuchun yelled, "We are going in to wipe out the Tatars."

Xu Da laughed and said, "There are no food and no water in the valley. Give them seven, eight days; the Tatars will die of

thirst and starvation. Why must we, brothers, painstakingly fight with them?"

Chang Yuchun also laughed, "I always prefer to kill them with my own hands."

Although Chang Yuchun was older than Xu Da, he usually submitted to Xu Da's intelligence; also, he noticed that Zhang Wuji did not contradict Xu Da, so he did not press on.

Xu and Chang, two men were battlefield-trained; their orders were appropriate and to the point. Zhang Wuji realized his battle experience was inferior to these two, therefore, he asked Xu and Chang to be in charge in pursuing and killing the runaway Yuan soldiers.

That evening, joyous noise shook the Shaoshi Peak, as the Ming Cult rebel army [orig. 'yi jun' - righteous army, or militia] and the heroes from all schools and sects celebrate their victory. After several days in a row always eating vegetarian dishes in the Shaolin Temple, they grew tired of the food. Tonight, wine and meat were overflowing; everybody could eat to their heart's content.

During the banquet, Zhang Wuji asked Chang Yuchun about his health; he wanted to know if Chang Yuchun diligently took the medicine he prescribed to nurse Chang Yuchun's health. Chang Yuchun laughed aloud and said, "Jiaozhu, don't worry. Lao Chang [the Ol' Chang] is as healthy as an ox, on one meal I can eat three catties of meat and six big bowls of rice. During the battle, lack of sleep for three days and three nights will not harm me a bit." His implication was that he did not need any medication. However, Zhang Wuji remembered what Hu Qingniu had told him; therefore, he earnestly implored him to take the medicine for his health. Chang Yuchun only gave him a non-committal answer,

because in his heart he greatly disapproved Zhang Wuji's advice.

Xu Da poured a cup full of wine to toast Zhang Wuji. "Congratulations, Jiaozhu," he said, "Please accept this toast!" Zhang Wuji received the cup and drank the wine.

Xu Da said, "Subordinate has always admired Jiaozhu's courage and wisdom in dealing with others, admired your peerless martial art skill. To my surprise, your military tactic is also marvelous. This is the great fortune of our Cult to the benefit of common people everywhere."

Zhang Wuji laughed out loud and said, "Xu Dage, no need to flatter me. Our great victory today was first, due to the amazingly speedy arrival of Xu Dage and Chang Dage; and second, due to the Yue Wumu's Legacy. Xiao Di [little brother] truly cannot take even a half part of credit."

"What is the Yue Wumu's Legacy?" Xu Da wondered, "I beg for Jiaozhu's explanation."

Zhang Wuji took a bundle of yellowish thin paper from his bosom. It was the Wumu Legacy, which was concealed inside the Tulong Saber. He turned the page to the 'Troops Trapped on the Ox-head Mountain' section and handed it over to Xu Da.

Xu Da received the book with both hands and read attentively for a moment. He could not help but be stunned and impressed at the same time. "Wumu's ability in managing the troops was truly divine, truly unachievable by the later generation," he sighed, "If Yue Wumu was still alive today, leading the warriors of the Central Plains, we would not worry about driving the Tatars back to the northern desert."

While saying that, he respectfully returned the book. But Zhang Wuji did not want to receive it. He said, “‘The most revered in the Wulin world, treasured Saber slaughtering the dragon; ruling everything under the heavens, no one dares to disobey.’ The real meaning of these sixteen characters, only today did I finally understand. The so-called ‘the most revered in the Wulin world’ is not the Saber itself, but it is the Legacy concealed inside the Saber. When this military strategy is used to face the enemy, fighting a battle will result in victory, attacking will result in subduing the enemy. Ultimately, ‘ruling everything under the heavens, no one dared to disobey.’ Otherwise, how can one rule everything under the heavens with just a single treasured saber? Xu Dage, I am passing this military strategy book to you. I hope you will use the notes Yue Wumu left behind to take our country [orig. ‘he shan’ – river and mountain] back and set up a new emperor [orig. ‘huang long – yellow dragon].”

Xu Da was taken aback. “What kind of virtue or ability does Subordinate have?” he hastily said, “How can I be worthy to accept such a generous gift from Jiaozhu?”

“Xu Dage,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Please do not decline. I am giving this book on military strategy to you on behalf of the common people.”

Xu Da held the book with trembling hands. Zhang Wuji continued, “There were two more lines in the saying circulating within the Wulin world: ‘Yitian [relying on Heaven] does not appear, who can match its sharpness?’ Presently, the Yitian Sword is broken into two; but someday someone will mend it. Hidden inside the Sword was a very fierce secret martial art manual. I also know the meaning of these last two lines. The Military Manual is to be used to drive the Tatars away. Somebody will seize the power. If it happens that the

new ruler is abusing his newfound power, that he is simply replacing one tyrant with another, so that the common people are oppressed with great suffering, then there will come a day when a hero, wielding the Yitian Sword, will sever the head of that tyrant. Although by commanding millions of warriors the tyrant is able to overturn the world, he might not necessarily be able to withstand one strike of the Yitian Sword. Xu Dage, I want you to remember what I said today.”

Xu Da’s back was streaming with cold sweats; he did not dare to decline anymore. “Subordinate will cautiously observe Jiaozhu’s instructions today,” he said. With full respect he placed the Wumu Legacy on the table, knelt down and kowtowed to it four times before respectfully thanking Zhang Wuji again for bestowing the book to him.

Hereafter, Xu Da did indeed command his troops with a divine skill; consecutively defeated the Yuan army, until finally he held the commander-in-chief position in the expedition to the north, driving away the Mongolians beyond the Great Wall. His prestige shook the northern desert, establishing meritorious achievement of his generation. Henceforth the Ming Cult was admired by the heroes of the Central Plains. Everywhere Zhang Wuji issued his order, nobody dared to disobey. For the last several hundred years the Ming Cult was held in contempt by the common people; they were considered demonic and heretical. After this heaven-turning-and-earth-shaking huge change, the Ming Cult became the leader of the heroes and warriors of the Central Plains, became the driving force behind the resurgence’s great mission. Later on, Zhu Yuanzhang turned double-minded and repeatedly schemed to ascend the throne. Even so, the Ming Cult people were the ones helping him to take back the country [here, the word is ‘jiang shan’ – river and mountain]; therefore, he could not help but choose

the character 'Ming' [bright] as his dynasty name. From the first year of Ming Dynasty's Emperor Hongwu [reign name of Zhu Yuanzhang] to the seventeenth year of Emperor Chongzhen [the last emperor of Ming Dynasty], 277 years of ruling the land under the heavens [i.e.China], it was because of the Ming Cult.

[Translator's note: Jin Yong original text says the first year of Hongwu was 'wu shen', the forty-fifth year of the 60-year cycle. History of China (J.A.G. Roberts) says Zhu Yuanzhang declared his new dynasty in January of the year 1368. The last year of Chongzhen was 'jia shen' - the twenty-first year of the 60-year cycle, or 1644. Roberts did say that Chongzhen committed suicide in 1644; however, $1368 + 277 = 1645$. The same book also says that Chongzhen reigned from 1628 to 1645 (seventeen years). One possible explanation I can think of is that according to Chinese calendar, January of 1368 was still considered the previous year.]

That evening, the multitude of heroes ate and drank until dawn; it was not until they were drunk did they go to their rooms to rest. Toward the afternoon, one by one they took their leave from Kong Wen and Kong Zhi. Zhang Wuji saw that the Emei disciples were like sheep without a shepherd, his heart was sorrowful. He also saw Song Qingshu was still lying on the stretcher; it was unclear whether he was still alive or had already died. Thereupon he went near them and said to Jing Hui, "Let me examine Song Dage's injury."

Jing Hui coldly said, "The cat weeps for the dead mouse. You don't need to shed crocodile tears."

Zhou Dian happened to be nearby; he could not restrain himself from cursing, "For the sake of old friendship with your Zhang Men [Sect Leader], our Jiaozhu is willing to treat this

surname Song's injury. Actually, everybody has the right to kill this kind of renegade and betrayer-of-father disciple. What is a wicked nun like you prattling about?"

Jing Hui was about to retort; but then she saw Zhou Dian's rogue looking ugly countenance, she was afraid he might be persistently unreasonable. If a fight broke, she would unavoidably be at a disadvantage; therefore, suppressing her anger she laughed coldly and said, "From generation to generation, our Emei Pai's Zhang Men has always be 'clear-as-ice-and-clean-as-jade' virgin. If Zhou Zhang Men did not maintain her moral integrity and chastity, how can she be our school's Zhang Men? Humph, if this kind of traitor Song Qingshu stayed with our Sect, he might smear Zhou Zhang Men's reputation. Li Shizhi [martial nephew], Long Shizhi, please return this fellow to Wudang Pai!"

The two Emei disciples carrying Song Qingshu complied. Lifting up the stretcher, they brought it to Yu Lianzhou and set it down in front of him before promptly returning to their group. Everybody was stunned.

"Wh ... what?" Yu Lianzhou asked, "He is not your Zhang Men's husband?"

"Humph," Jing Hui hatefully said, "How could our Zhang Men even look at a man like that? She was unbearably angry to that kid Zhang Wuji for breaking faith and running away from their wedding; humiliating our Sect in front of the heroes from all over the world. It was then that she deceived this kid to come and pretend to be her husband. Who would have thought ... humph, humph, if we had only known, why should our Zhang Men endure this notoriety? Presently, she ... she ..."

Zhang Wuji had been listening from the side with a dull

expression on his face; he could not restrain himself from stepping forward and asking, “You said Mrs. Song ... she ... she is not really Mrs. Song?”

Jing Hui turned her head and hatefully said, “I am not talking to you.”

Right this moment, Song Qingshu, who was still lying on the stretcher, stirred and moaned, “Is ... is Zhang Wuji killed?”

“On your dream!” Jing Hui sneered, “Death is at your door, you are still thinking about pretty face.”

Seeing Jing Hui was emotional and her speech was incoherent, in low voice Yin Liting asked another female disciple of Emei, Bei Jinyi, “Bei Shimei [martial (younger) sister), what had actually happened?”

Bei Jinyi was a good friend of Ji Xiaofu. As Yin Liting asked her, she hesitated for a long time before saying, “Jing Hui Shijie [martial (older) sister), Yin Liu Xia is not an outsider. Let Xiao Mei [little sister – referring to self] explain to him, alright?”

“What outsider or not outsider?” Jing Hui replied, “He is not an outsider, we must explain it to him. He is an outsider, we must explain it to him even more. Our Zhou Zhang Men is clean and pure; she has nothing to do with this crafty villain surnamed Song. All of you have seen the ‘shou gong sha’ [lit. gecko/house lizard sand, ‘chastity mark’?] on Zhang Men’s arm with your own eyes. We must make this fact known to the Wulin people all over the world, so that our Emei Pai’s hundred years of uprightness will not be blemished ...”

Yin Liting thought, “This Jing Hui Shitai’s mind is jumbled; her speech is somewhat confusing.” Thereupon he said to Bei

Jinyi, "Bei Shimei, since that is the case, could you elaborate more? How did my Song Shizhi get involved with your precious Pai? What relationship did he have with your precious Pai's Zhang Men? Someday Xiao Xiong [lit. little/humble elder brother] must report to our Shifu. This matter concerns both of our Sects; I think it will be better not to damage the friendship between the two parties."

Bei Jinyi sighed and said, "Speaking about both behavior and martial art skill, this Song Shao Xia [young hero] could actually be considered a rare talent within the Wulin world. Only because of one silly youthful lust, he has fallen into such sin. Apparently our Zhang Men promised him that as soon as Zhang Wuji is killed to wash away the humiliation she experienced in her wedding day, she would marry him. Thereupon he agreed to join our Sect and asked our Zhang Men for advice in the marvelous martial art. During the Heroes Assembly the day before yesterday, Zhang Men suddenly declared herself as 'Mrs. Song'; by saying that she was the wife of this Song Shao Xia. At that time, all our Sect's disciples were utterly astonished. That same day our Zhang Men's prestige shook the crowd of heroes by subduing all Sects ..."

Zhou Dian interrupted, "It was because our Jiaozhu was yielding to her intentionally; what a loud horn you are blowing!"

Bei Jinyi ignored him, she continued, "Although our Sect's disciples were very happy, when evening came, we still asked her where the 'Mrs. Song', three characters [Song Fu Ren] came from. Zhang Men exposed her right arm and sternly said, 'Everybody, come and see!' All of us saw with our own eyes the scarlet 'shou gong sha' on her arm, so we know that she has kept her chastity. Zhang Men said, 'It was expedient that I call myself Mrs Song for the time being. I

need to make that kid Zhang Wuji angry, to disturb his mind so that I may seize victory over him. This kid's martial art is simply too remarkable, I definitely cannot defeat him. For the sake of our Sect's reputation, why should I care about my own?' She said that with determination and in loud voice as if she wanted everybody to hear it clearly. She also said, 'The disciples of this Sect, male or female, unless they are 'chu jia xiu dao' [those who leave home (to become Buddhist monks or nuns), and those who practice Daoism], are never forbidden from getting married. However, since our founder Guo Zu Shi's [lit. ancestor master], all highest and deepest martial art skills are imparted only to virgins who keep themselves pure. Each time a female disciple bows down to enter our school, Shifu will always plant 'shou gong sha' on our arms. Every year, on Guo Zu Shi birthday, Xian Shi [departed master] would perform inspection. That year Ji Shijie ... it was ..." Speaking to this point, she stammered and then stopped altogether.

Yin Liting and the others understood clearly, however, that Bei Jinyi was going to say that when Ji Xiaofu was violated by Yang Xiao, her 'shou gong sha' disappeared and that was how her disgrace was discovered by Mijue Shitai. Yin Liting and Yang Buhui were happily married, yet as he remembered Ji Xiaofu this time, he could not help from feeling deep sorrow in his heart. Involuntarily he cast a sidelong glance toward Yang Xiao and saw that Yang Xiao's eyes were brimming with tears as he turned his head away.

"Yin Liu Xia," Bei Jinyi said, "Our Zhang Men deliberately wanted to anger the Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji by taking advantage of this Song Shao Xia's endless infatuation toward our Zhang Men, in the end, it gave birth to many problems. I wish for Song Shao Xia's recovery, also for Yin Liu Xia to talk to Zhang Zhenren and Song Da Xia, so as to avoid further hostility between your precious Sect and ours."

Yin Liting nodded. "So that's how it is. My Shizhi was disobedient and he defied his superior, his death will not be regretted. He truly did bring shame to our humble Sect. I only wish he would die cleanly sooner." Yin Liting was softhearted by nature, but recalling Song Qingshu's grave offense by murdering Mo Shenggu, he was really repulsed by him.

While they were still talking, suddenly from a distant came a shrill scream; it sounded like Zhou Zhiruo's voice, full of shock and fear, as if she had met some extremely dangerous misfortune. Everybody was horrified; especially since it was in the middle of the day, the sun was shining brightly, with people everywhere all around them. Yet this scream was so hair rising, as if the person screaming suddenly saw an evil spirit appear before her very eyes. Almost like on cue, everybody turned their heads to the direction of the noise.

Zhang Wuji, Jing Hui, Bei Jinyi and the others rushed forward. Zhang Wuji was afraid Zhou Zhiruo might meet a powerful enemy, so he ran full speed ahead. After several jumps, he had already entered the forest. He saw a dark green shadow running wildly towards him, it was none other than Zhou Zhiruo.

Quickly Zhang Wuji met her and asked, "Zhiruo, what is it?"

Zhou Zhiruo cried out with a face full of terror, "Ghost, ghost! There's a ghost chasing me!" She threw herself to Zhang Wuji's chest, while trembling uncontrollably.

Seeing her so frightened as if her soul was leaving her, Zhang Wuji patted her shoulder gently. "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid; there is no ghost," he said consolingly, "What did you see?" He noticed that her clothes were tattered from

running through the thick briar and her face was full of bloodstains. Half of the sleeve on her left arm was torn, exposing a snow-white, lotus-root colored arm. Sure enough, there was a red dot, as red as a coral or a red jade, the 'shou gong sha'.

Zhang Wuji was proficient in medicine. He knew that once this 'shou gong sha' was implanted under the skin, it would stay forever, unless the woman marries or loses her chastity. When listening to Jing Hui and Bei Jinyi previously, he was still half-believing and half-doubting. Now as he saw it with his own eyes, not even half a suspicion remained in his heart.

In that moment, myriads of thoughts filled his mind. "So her marriage with Song Qingshu was a fake. Why did she deceive me? Why did she deliberately want to anger me? Was it truly because of that 'Number One Martial Artist of the Present Age' title? Was it because she wanted to test my heart, whether I still have feelings toward her?" Just as quick, he remembered, "Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, Miss Zhou is the enemy who murdered your Biaomei. Whether she is a virgin or already married to someone else, what do you have to do with it?" Yet seeing how terrified Zhou Zhiruo was, he did not have a heart to push her away.

Zhou Zhiruo buried her face in Zhang Wuji's chest. She was aware of Zhang Wuji's broad and muscular body and smelled his masculine breath; gradually her fear subsided. "Wuji Gege," she said, "Is it you?"

"It is I," Zhang Wuji replied, "What did you see? Why were you terrified like that?"

Zhou Zhiruo was suddenly enveloped by fear again. 'Wah!' she broke into crying again; she sobbed uncontrollably on Zhang Wuji's shoulder with hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

By this time, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Jing Hui, Yin Liting and the others arrived one after another. Seeing this scene, they signaled each other with their eyes and withdrew quietly. Ming Cult, Wudang Pai and Emei Pai people were all still hoping in their hearts that Zhou Zhiruo will be reconciled with Zhang Wuji and they will become husband and wife. Admittedly, it was difficult for all these people to forget Zhao Min's offense in the past. In addition, Zhao Min was a Mongolian woman; if Zhang Wuji took her as his wife, they were afraid it would hinder their great mission.

After crying for a while, Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, "Wuji Gege, is there somebody chasing me?"

"No," Zhang Wuji replied, "Who is chasing you? Is it the Xuanming Elders?"

"No! Not them!" Zhou Zhiruo said, "Have you looked clearly? Are you sure nobody ... no, it was not a human ... Are you sure nothing, whatever it is, pursuing me?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "The sun is shining brightly, I can see everything clearly." His voice turned gentle; "Zhiruo," he said, "You have spent too much energy these past few days; you must be really tired. Perhaps you hallucinated and thought you saw something."

"Can't be! Can't possibly be!" Zhou Zhiruo insisted, "I saw it three times; three consecutive times." Her voice trembled; obviously she was terrified.

"What is it that you saw three consecutive times?" Zhang Wuji asked.

With one hand on his shoulder, Zhou Zhiruo tried to stand up

on her trembling feet. And then, mustering all her courage and strength she turned around to look back. Just an instant she quickly turned her eyes toward Zhang Wuji again and seeing his gentle and soft expression, full of concern, her heart ached; suddenly she felt weary and dropped down on the ground.

“Wuji Gege,” she said, “I ... I have deceived you. I was the one who took Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, I was the one who killed ... killed Yin ... Miss Yin ... I was the one who sealed Xie Da Xia’s acupoint. I ... I did not marry Song Qingshu. In my heart I always have only ... only you alone.” Zhang Wuji sighed. “Actually, I have already known everything. But ... but why did you do it?”

Crying, Zhou Zhiruo said, “You don’t know what my Shifu told me on the Wan An Temple Pagoda. She told me the secret of the Yitian Sword and the Tulong Saber. She wanted me to obtain the treasured Sword and Saber at all costs, to brighten the name of Emei Pai. She made me swear a heavy oath to pretend that I like you, but she would not allow me to fall in love with you ...”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her arm, remembering how he had witnessed Miejue Shitai struck Ji Xiaofu dead with her palm, how in the great desert Miejue Shitai swore to destroy the Ming Cult, how he saw her massacre the Cult disciples under the Rui Jin Flag with Yitian Sword in her hand. Afterwards, soaring down from the Wan An Temple Pagoda, she preferred death to being help by him. It all showed how deep her hatred toward the Ming Cult was. Since Zhou Zhiruo was appointed her successor and had received her last words, all kinds of malicious and cruel acts she did must be because of her Shifu’s instructions.

By his nature, Zhang Wuji had always been very easy to

forgive other people's offense. He had never held any grudge against anybody. Moreover, he remembered her kindness when they were little on the boat floating along the Hanshui River, how she helped him eat and took a good care of him. Also, during the fierce battle on the Brightness Peak, when he was fighting He Taichong, husband and wife, and the two tall and short elders of Huashan Pai, perhaps he would have been dead right then and there if she did not give him directions from the side. On top of that, he remembered that although she was malicious, cruel and crafty, all her actions were caused by her deep feelings toward him.

This moment, as her delicate and frail body was leaning against his bosom, Zhang Wuji could not help from having a tender feeling toward her. "Zhiruo," he called in a soft voice, "What did you actually see, which made you that scared?"

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo jumped up and said, "I am not going to say. It must be one of those restless spirit came back to entangle me. I have done too much evil. I deserve this revenge. I have explained to you everything, I ... I won't live long ..." Covering her face, she scurried down the mountain.

Zhang Wuji felt as if his mind was enveloped in fog. "What restless ghost entangled her? Was it the Beggar Clan's people seeking revenge on her and dressed up as a ghost to frighten her?" Slowly he turned around and walked back to the Temple.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo go toward the Emei Pai crowd. Bei Jinyi took a coat and wrapped it around her shoulder. Zhou Zhiruo said something in low voice and the Emei Pai disciples bowed together.

By this time, most of the multitude of heroes had left the mountain, Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two monks were busy

sending them off. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao and the others congregated around Zhang Wuji. "We'd better take our leave too," Zhang Wuji said.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo walk toward Kong Wen and speak in a low voice. Kong Wen's countenance changed; he looked startled. Then Kong Wen shook his head. Whatever it was, it looked like Kong Wen had just refused her request. Zhou Zhiruo talked some more, and then suddenly she knelt down in front of him. Claspng her palms together, she mumbled something that looked like she was praying. Kong Wen looked somber, his mouth muttered praises to Buddha.

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "You must quickly stop her, don't let her do it."

"Don't let her do what?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhou Dian replied, "Miss Zhou is going to leave home [orig. chu jia] to become a monk. She ... she is going to enter the gate of emptiness. It will be bad for you."

Yang Xiao snickered and said, "Even if Miss Zhou is going to leave home, she will become a nun, not a monk. Why would she take a Shaolin Pai monk to be her master?"

Zhou Dian slapped his forehead loudly. "Right, right!" he said, "I was muddleheaded. But what is Miss Zhou asking Kong Wen Dashi to do? One is Shaolin Pai Zhang Men, the other is Emei Pai Zhang Men, they are equal, nobody needs to kneel down in front of the other."

They saw Zhou Zhiruo standing up; her face showed she was somewhat comforted. Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "We don't need to meddle into someone else's business." Turning his head, he said, "Min Mei, let us leave." Who would have thought that as he turned his head, he did not see Zhao Min.

For the last several days, Zhao Min had never left his side; she always shadowed Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji was slightly stunned. "Where is Miss Zhao?" he asked, while in his heart he silently cursed, "Bad! I am sure Min Mei saw me when Zhiruo leaned against my chest. Could it be that she thinks I cannot forget my old flame and considers me as hopeless?" Hastily he ordered everybody to look for her.

Xin Ran, the Flag Leader of Lie Huo Flag said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: subordinate saw Miss Zhao walking down the mountain!"

Zhang Wuji was grieved. "Min Mei has abandoned everything to follow me," he mused, "She has gone through I don't know how many adversities. How can I give up on her?" Thereupon, he turned to Yang Xiao and said, "Yang Xiong, I am asking you to take care of our business here. I am going to leave first."

He bid his farewell to Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, also to Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting and the others. Last of all, he said to Zhou Zhiruo, "Zhiruo, take a good care of yourself. We'll meet again some day soon." Zhou Zhiruo hung her head low; she did not reply, only nodded slightly. Beads of silver tears fell down from her face to the dusty ground.

Unleashing his 'qing gong', Zhang Wuji dashed down the mountain. For the next several 'li's, the mountain path was full with the heroes returning home from Shaolin Temple. He was not willing to greet the heroes one by one, so he simply flew past them from the side, yet along the way he did not see any trace of Zhao Min at all. In one breath he had pursued for more than thirty 'li's. The sky was turning dark, the people walking along the road was thinning. Suddenly he remembered, "Min Mei is best in planning and scheming. If

she has a mind to avoid me, then most likely she will avoid the main road. Otherwise, with my speed, I should have caught up with her long ago. Could it be that she is still hiding around the Shaoshi Peak, waiting for me to leave before she comes out and walk away?"

Burning with anxiety and he forgetting his own hunger and thirst, he ran back around the hills and valleys. Oftentimes he leaped up a tall tree, a hill peak or steep slope, looking to all directions. The empty mountain was quiet, the only noise came from the crows flying home for the night. Circling around toward the back of the Shaoshi Peak, he still did not see Zhao Min. "Whatever happens," he mused, "I will always be faithful to you. Even if I have to go to the end of the earth or the corner of the ocean, I will find you."

Once he made this decision, his mind calmed down. Looking toward the northeast he saw two large locust trees grew side by side, towering high from a crevasse on the side of the mountain. Leaping up the tree, he found a large branch extended horizontally and lied down on this branch. After toiling for the whole day and facing many unforeseen incidents, he fell asleep not too long after he lied down.

Toward the middle of the night, in his sleep he suddenly heard gentle footsteps from several dozens 'zhang's away, which made him wake up with a start. By this time, the round bright moon had already slanting toward the western sky. Under the moonlight, he saw on the hillside, there was a shadow floating speedily to the south. That person's figure was slender with a slim waist; obviously, the shadow belonged to a woman.

In his great delight, he nearly called 'Min Mei'; but he immediately realized something was not right. The woman's figure was taller than Zhao Min, her 'qing gong' was entirely

different from Zhao Min's, although her speed was inferior to Zhou Zhiruo's, her steps were lighter and livelier. His curiosity was piqued. "This woman wanders alone in the deep of the night, I wonder what is it she is doing?" he mused.

At first he thought that he did not have any business to meddle with whatever this woman was doing, but then he thought, "Who knows? Perhaps I will find Min Mei's whereabouts from this woman. If she has nothing to do with Min Mei, then I will slip out quietly, no harm done. I must not let any clue off easily." Thereupon he got up from the tree branch and quietly slipped down.

Afraid that the woman might detect his presence, he did not dare to get too close. Besides, by stalking a young girl - a total stranger for that matter - in the middle of the night, it might be difficult for him to avoid frivolous suspicions from others.

He noticed that the woman was wearing black clothes, and she indeed was heading toward the Shaolin Temple. "Although she has nothing to do with Min Mei, she must be doing some clandestine activity related to the Wulin world," he thought, "If her intention is not beneficial to Shaolin, I must interfere." He halted his steps to listen, and did not hear any other people nearby, so he knew that this woman did not have anybody supporting her.

Walking for about the time needed to eat a bowl of rice, that woman had never turned her head around. Zhang Wuji had a vague feeling that this woman looked somewhat familiar, as if he had seen her somewhere before. "Is she Miss Wu Qingying? Or one of the Emei Pai female disciples?"

Several 'li's later, Shaolin Temple was already in sight. The

woman turned toward the side of the hill, approaching the Temple from the side. Suddenly she slowed down her steps and moved surreptitiously among the trees and the mountain rocks. It was obvious that she was afraid someone might see her.

Suddenly he heard clear ringing noise coming from the main hall of the Shaolin Temple, followed by the sound of chanting of several hundred Buddhist monks. Zhang Wuji was greatly puzzled, "Shaolin monks are still chanting sutra deep into the night, and there are hundreds of them. Is there an important ceremony going on?" he mused.

The woman in front of him proceeded even more stealthily. Several dozens 'zhang's more, she would have reached the side of the main hall. Suddenly there were light footsteps. The woman quickly ducked among the thick patch of grass. Four Shaolin monks with sabers and Buddhist staffs were patrolling around the Temple. The woman waited for the four monks to pass before standing up, and leaped toward the shutter by the main hall. Her leap was as light as flying cotton wool; her 'qing gong' was truly top-notch among the Wulin characters. Zhang Wuji noticed that she did not carry any weapon, plus she was alone; hence he believed it was unlikely that she came to Shaolin Temple to create trouble. He wanted to know who the woman was, whether she was a friend or a foe; therefore, crouching behind her, he crept toward the northwest corner of the main hall.

He realized that he was in a very awkward situation. Someone of his position snooping around the Temple in the middle of the night, if he was detected by a Shaolin monk, although the other party might feign ignorance, he will not be able to avoid losing a great deal of face. And thus he was twice more careful; each step he took and each movement was as nimble as a cat stalking a mouse.

By this time, the chanting inside the hall was getting louder. Peeking from a crack on the window, he saw hundreds of monks arranged in neat rows, all sitting on round meditation mats, all wearing yellow Buddhist robes, draped in scarlet and gold kasayas. Some of them were holding ceremonial articles in their hands; the rest of them clasped their palms together with heads hung low, loudly chanting the sutras. It sounded like they were offering prayers to send departing souls crossing into the netherworld. Zhang Wuji understood immediately. "In the Great Hero Assembly this time, there were not a few people lost their lives. During the Yuan army attack up the mountain, even more people from both sides perished. Therefore, the Temple monks are holding this ceremony tonight so that the dead will be reborn happily."

He saw that Reverend Kong Wen was standing in front of the sacrificial table. There was a young woman standing on his right. As soon as Zhang Wuji saw her, he was slightly stunned, since that young woman was none other than Zhou Zhiruo. Although he could only see her from the side, he could tell that her expression definitely showed grieve and distress; her pretty eyebrows were deeply wrinkled, as if she was harboring a deep sorrow.

"That must be it," Zhang Wuji thought, "The reason Zhiruo kneeled down in front of Kong Wen Dashi this afternoon must be to ask him to hold this Buddhist ceremony. I suppose she is repenting from her conduct and deeds. The innocents who lose their lives under her claw and her sword are simply too many."

Focusing his eyes, he tried to read the memorial tablets arranged on the sacrificial table. To his great surprise, one of the tablets read 'nu xia Yin Li zhi ling wei', seven characters [the memorial tablet of Heroine Yin Li]. Zhang Wuji felt a stab

of pain in his heart, remembering how during her short and miserable life his cousin had always passionately devoted to him; he could not help from shedding some tears.

Amidst the ringing of chime stones and the tapping of wooden fish, Zhou Zhiruo gracefully kneeled down and bowed to the ground, while her lips were moving in quiet prayer. Zhang Wuji raised up his 'shen gong' [divine strength] trying to listen to what she said. This was what he heard, "Miss Yin ... your spirit in Heaven ... rest in peace ... do not come to harass me ..."

Zhang Wuji tightened his grip on the wall while disquieting thoughts filled his mind. "Biaomei lost her life under her sword, no doubt it was a cruel fate; but the torment inside Zhiruo's heart, the pain she is suffering, might not necessarily be lighter than Biaomei's. Suddenly from the ocean of thoughts in his mind a song surged up, the song he heard on the Brightness Peak, sung by the Ming Cult people, "What joy is in life, what pain in death? I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings! I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings!"

Zhou Zhiruo stood up slowly with her body slightly facing the east. Suddenly her countenance greatly changed, while she called out, "You ... you ... you have come again!" Her voice was shrill, suppressing all other noises in the main hall.

Zhang Wuji followed the direction of her eyes and saw the paper pasted on the window was somehow torn, and the hole revealed a young woman's face. The face was full of scars. Zhang Wuji was so shocked that he shivered and could not stop from crying out. Although that young woman's face was full of scars and the bumps of the former days were gone, he was very sure the face belonged to his dead cousin, Yin Li!

He wanted to rush forward and call her, but his legs did not obey their master's bidding; it was as if his feet were planted on the ground.

As the face appeared suddenly on the window, there was a loud crash in the main hall as Zhou Zhiruo fainted and fell to the floor. Zhang Wuji no longer cared whatever Shaolin Pai might think of him; he called out loudly, "Zhu'er, Zhu'er! [spider kid] is that you?" But no one answered him.

After calming himself down, he flew to the back of the hall to pursue, but all he saw was the moon hanging low on the horizon, casting its cold shadow on the trees; the young woman in black was nowhere to be seen. Normally he did not believe in deities and demons, but faced with these kinds of images and scenes, he could not restrain cold sweats from wetting his body and hairs from rising on the back of his neck. Bracing himself, he said to himself, "It is she, it is she! No wonder her back looked so familiar, turns out it is Zhu'er. Did her ghost know that the eminent Shaolin monks are offering prayers to help her crossover to the netherworld, so she came here to receive the prayers? Could it be that because she died an unjust death her spirit did not find peace?"

As the Shaolin monks heard some noise, several people came over to investigate. As they saw Zhang Wuji, they could not help but be startled. A senior monk stepped forward, saluted him and said, "We did not know Zhang Jiaozhu came to visit this late at night, otherwise we would have welcomed you properly. Please accept our apology."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji replied, cupping his fists to return the propriety. Stepping aside, he entered the main hall.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo's eyes were shut tight; her face was without any sign of blood. Apparently, she had not regained her consciousness. Walking toward her, he put forth his strength to massage her and knead [orig. 'tui na' – a form of Chinese manual therapy] her back for some time. Zhou Zhiruo slowly awakened.

As she saw Zhang Wuji and realized she was in his embrace, Zhou Zhiruo hugged him and called out, "Ghost, there is a ghost!"

Zhang Wuji said, "This is indeed strange, but you don't need to be afraid. There are so many eminent monks in here. I am sure they will be able to solve this mystery."

Zhou Zhiruo had always been a dignified and staid woman. This time she was scared out of her wits, and right now she was embracing him in public; hearing him say these words, her face blushed and she busily pried herself away from him. She stood up, but could not stop herself from shivering. Quickly she grabbed his hand and even if she had to die, she would not dare to let him go.

Zhang Wuji exchanged some propriety with Kong Wen; he mentioned that someone was spying on them outside the window just now. Neither Kong Wen nor any of the monks had seen it, but the fact remained that it was a new torn on the paper, and the hole was still there.

"Wuji Ge ... Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "That was what I saw earlier." Zhang Wuji nodded.

"You ... you ..." Zhou Zhiruo's voice was trembling, "Who did you say she was?"

"She is Miss Yin, my Biaomei Yin Li," Zhang Wuji replied. Zhou Zhiruo cried out in fear and fainted again.

This time Zhang Wuji pulled her hand that she did not fall to the floor. She was unconscious for a moment but quickly recovered. Zhang Wuji said, "I did see Biaomei, but ... she is a human, not a ghost!"

"She is not a ghost?" Zhou Zhiruo was still trembling.

Zhang Wuji said, "I followed her all the way to Shaolin Temple. She walked like a human, not like a ghost." He had said that to comfort Zhou Zhiruo, but deep in his heart, he was unsure.

"So you saw her walking like a human and not like a ghost?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji then recounted how he saw that black-dressed young woman and followed her all the way to Shaolin Temple; also how he saw her hiding outside the long window and spying inside the main hall. Every action and every movement was of a young woman who was adept in martial arts, not at all peculiar in any way.

"Fangzhang," he asked Kong Wen, "I [orig. 'zaixia' - the humble one] have one thing I am not sure I understand, I beg Fangzhang's advice. When someone dies, will he really become a ghost?"

Kong Wen pondered about it deeply for half a day before answering, "The matter of the netherworld is difficult to assert."

Zhang Wuji said, "That being the case, why did Fangzhang hold a ceremony to cross the departing soul to the netherworld?"

“Shanzai, zhanzai!” Kong Wen said, “The departing soul need not be helped to cross over. In the matter of live and death, virtue has its reward, evil has its retribution. The way of Buddha seeks to help living people achieving peace; the ones need help to cross over are the living ones.”

Zhang Wuji understood immediately. Cupping his fists he said, “Many thanks for the direction. I have stirred up trouble and caused disturbance this late at night. I only wish for Fangzhang’s forgiveness.”

Kong Wen smiled and said, “Jiaozhu is our humble Sect’s great benefactor. You have saved us several times, enabling Shaolin Pai to avoid disaster; why be overly courteous?”

Immediately Zhang Wuji took his leave from the crowd of monks. To Zhou Zhiruo he said, “Let us leave!”

Zhou Zhiruo seemed reluctant, she was afraid to leave the security of the Buddhist hall. Zhang Wuji did not feel comfortable to urge her strongly; he simply cupped his fists again and said, “In that case, we will say goodbye here.” Finished speaking, he turned around toward the hall gate.

Watching his back, suddenly Zhou Zhiruo called out, “Wuji Gege, will you see me again? I ... let me go with you.” She jumped to catch up with him, and then side-by-side they walked out the Temple gate.

After they were far away from the Shaolin Temple, Zhou Zhiruo leaned on Zhang Wuji’s side and held on to his hand. Zhang Wuji knew she was still afraid. With her soft and smooth palm in his hand, and catching a whiff of fragrance coming from her body, it was not possible for his heart to remain unmoved.

The two of them walked silently for quite some time. Zhou Zhiruo slowly heaved a deep sigh and said, "Wuji Gege, when you and I met for the first time at Hanshui River that day, I was saved by Zhang Zhenren. If only I knew that I would suffer so much pain in the later days, my death in Hanshui River that day would be a lot cleaner."

Zhang Wuji did not answer; in his heart he remembered the song the Ming Cult people, and without realizing it, he was humming softly, "What joy is in life, what pain in death? I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings!"

Listening to the lyrics of this song, Zhou Zhiruo's hand, which held his slightly trembled. In a low voice she said, "Zhang Zhenren brought me to Emei Pai. He had my well-being in his mind. But if he, Senior, took me under his wings on the Wudang Mountain, letting me be a disciple of Wudang, everything today would be entirely different. Ay, it is not that En Shi [benevolent master] was not good to me, but ... but she forced me to make that evil oath, wanted me to abhor the Ming Cult, wanted me to hate you and harm you, while in my heart ... in all honesty ..."

Zhang Wuji was rather touched to hear the sincerity in her voice; he understood she indeed have many difficulties, all sorts of vicious matters, mostly because she honored Miejue Shitai's last words. Seeing that she was also very scared, his compassion to her grew one layer deeper.

The night breeze blew gently on the mountain road, transmitting faint fragrance of wild flowers around them. It was early summer, the night was clear. With a beautiful girl pouring out her heart so close to him, Zhang Wuji could not stop his heart from beating faster. Moreover, when he helped her driving out the poison on that little island, they were flesh-and-skin close. She had shown him kindness in the

past, and she was engaged to him once. All of these had made his heart confused and he was at a loss.

“Wuji Gege,” Zhou Zhiruo continued, “In Haozhou that day, when you were just about to get married to me, why did as soon as Miss Zhao bid you, you immediately come with her? Do you really love her with all your heart?”

“I was just about to tell you what happened that day,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Why don’t we stop and sit for a while?” He pointed to a big rock by the side of the road.

“No,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “At this moment, my heart is in turmoil, I won’t be able to listen to you. Let us walk quietly for a moment longer before talking about that.”

Zhang Wuji nodded. He followed her wander around, seemingly aimlessly. Zhou Zhiruo led him through a small path and walked for four, five ‘li’s before she finally said, “All right, you can tell me.” She walked toward a large mountain rock in front of a clump of bushes. The two of them sat side by side.

Thereupon Zhang Wuji told her how Zhao Min had in her hand a bunch of Xie Xun’s golden hair, which leave him no choice but to walk away, and everything else that happened afterwards. Zhou Zhiruo listened from start to finish, and then for half a day she did not say anything.

“Zhiruo, do you blame me?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Choking, Zhou Zhiruo said, “I have done so many wrong things, I can only blame myself, why would I blame you?”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her shoulder and said in a tender voice, “In this world, mistakes arise out of circumstances.

Things are difficult to anticipate. You must not be excessively heartbroken.”

“Wuji Gege,” Zhou Zhiruo raised her head to look at him, “I have something I want to ask you, I want you to answer me sincerely, you must not have the slightest degree of concealment.”

“All right,” Zhang Wuji said, “I will not conceal anything from you.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I know on this world there are four women who love you with all their hearts. One has gone away to Persia, Xiao Zhao. One is Miss Zhao, the other is ... she ...” She was going to say ‘Miss Yin’, but she did not have the courage to utter that name out of her mouth. After pausing for a moment, she continued, “If all four of us all alive and well, and right now we are by your side, which one of us do you really love?”

Zhang Wuji felt a burst of confusion rising in his heart. “This ... mm ... this ...” he stuttered.

Even since that day, when he was on the boat floating aimlessly on the ocean with Zhou Zhiruo, Zhao Min, Yin Li and Xiao Zhao, certainly more than once he had thought about this matter. “Each of these four women loves me very much, what should I do? No matter which one I marry, I will deeply hurt the other three’s hearts. But in the end, in the deepest part of my heart, which one do I really love?”

Since it had always been difficult for him to decide, he told himself to just evade the question altogether. Sometimes he thought, “The Tatars are not driven out yet, our country [orig. ‘he shan’ – river and mountain] is not being recovered yet, the barbarians [orig. ‘xiong nu’ – a general term for nomadic

people] are not destroyed yet; how can I build a family? In the end, what reason do I have for having sons and daughters?"

Another times he thought, "I am the Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult. Anything I say, goes. I am responsible for the prosperity and decline of not only our Cult, but the Wulin world as well. I am confident that in all my life, I had done nothing to be ashamed of. Yet, if I let myself indulge in female charms, not only I will invite the ridicule of the heroes of the world, I will also spoil our Cult's reputation."

Yet another time he thought, "Just before she died, my Mama earnestly exhorted me that beautiful women are most capable of deceiving people, warned me to be extremely careful all of my life. How can I not heed Mama's last words to me?"

Actually, arguing every way he liked, in the end he was no more than deceiving himself. Deciding which young woman he loved most would not necessarily hinder the great undertaking of recovering his country. It would not in any way affect Ming Cult's reputation. He only thought that this one was very nice, that one was also good, and thus he did not dare to think about them too much. His martial art skill might be strong, but his natural disposition was actually indecisive; all things considered, he preferred to let nature take its own course. When forced to make decision, he would rather sacrifice his own desire than disagree with other people's wishes. Take the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, for example. He trained it because of Xiao Zhao's encouragement. By right, he had held the authority to become the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult; yet he needed Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang and the others to push him before he agreed to them. His engagement with Zhou Zhiruo was because he was honoring Xie Xun's request. He did not bow to the Heaven and the

Earth with Zhou Zhiruo because Zhao Min compelled him. That day, if Jin Hua Popo and Yin Li did not use force, but persuaded him nicely to come with them to the Lingshe Island, he would most likely go with them.

Every once in a while, though, he could not help but think, "If I can spend the rest of my life with these four women, living together harmoniously, won't I have a happy and carefree life?" After all, it was the end of the Yuan Dynasty; whether it was a scholar, a merchant, a Jianghu warrior or an outlaw, it was not uncommon for a man to have three wives and four concubines. On the contrary it was extremely rare for a man to have only one wife. It was just that the Ming Cult originated from Persia, where the followers were encouraged to live a frugal and hard-working life, so that taking a concubine in addition to a single wife was unusual.

Zhang Wuji was a mild-natured man. He had this idea that no matter which girl he married, it was to his greatest good fortune. Supposing he took more than one wife, he felt he would be unfair to the other. Consequently, as this thought keep flashing in and out of his head, he always tried to suppress it. Whenever he remembered it, he would immediately rebuke himself, "One must always be content with whatever one has; yet I always indulge in this kind of thought. Won't that mean I am a despicable man? Shame on me!"

Later on, Xiao Zhao went to Persia, Yin Li died, and supposedly, Zhao Min was the one who murdered her. Logically speaking, the only option left for him was to marry Zhou Zhiruo. However, through some unexpected mishaps, some bizarre twists and turns, the truth was gradually being revealed. Zhou Zhiruo and Zhao Min switched places as the good and the evil. He felt so fortunate for not marrying Zhou Zhiruo and thus cast his blunder in stone. In addition, the

fact that Zhao Min broke her relationship with her father and brother was publicly known; therefore, he should not have any difficulty in making up his mind, should he? Against all his thoughts and expectations, Zhao Min suddenly disappeared without telling him anything; and right now Zhou Zhiruo was forcing him into a corner with her question.

Seeing him hesitate without answering, Zhou Zhiruo said, "My question is hypothetical, of course. Xiao Zhao has become the Persian Ming Cult's virgin Cult Leader, I have ... have killed Miss Yin. Out of these four women, Miss Zhao is your only choice. I just want to know, supposing that all four of us are alive and well, we are all by your side, then what would you do?"

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji finally said, "This matter has been burdening my heart for too long. Obviously, it was very difficult for me to make up my mind, until today ... I know now who my true love is."

"Who is it?" Zhou Zhiruo asked, "Is it ... is it Miss Zhao?"

"That's right," Zhang Wuji replied, "Today, when I looked for her and could not find her, I wish I was dead. If I henceforth cannot see her again, I do not wish to live longer. When Xiao Zhao left me, I was extremely heart-broken. When my Biaomei died, I was even more grieved. You ... you came back like this, I was not only pained, but feeling deep regret as well. But, Zhiruo, I won't lie to you, if for the rest of my life I cannot see Miss Zhao anymore, I'd rather die. This is my deepest feeling, which I have never made known to anybody else." At first, all four women: Yin Li, Zhou Zhiruo, Xiao Zhao and Zhao Min were equal in Zhang Wuji's eyes. But as Zhao Min walked away from him today, he suddenly realized Zhao Min's true place in his heart; she was not on the same position as the other three women.

As Zhou Zhiruo heard him say so, she quietly said, "That day at Dadu, I saw you go to that small wine shop to meet her, I knew exactly where your heart really was. It was just wishful thinking in my heart; if you and I get married perhaps ... perhaps I can pull you back to love me. In all honesty ... really ... I know that is of course impossible."

Zhang Wuji said apologetically, "Zhiruo, toward you, I have always had respect. Toward Yin Jia Biaomei [younger female cousin of Yin family], my heart will always be grateful. Toward Xiao Zhao, I have always had a soft spot in my heart for her. But toward Miss Zhao, actually ... actually I have an engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love."

"Engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love, engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love," Zhou Zhiruo muttered. After pausing a moment, she said in low voice, "Wuji Gege ... my love to you is also engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love. Don't you ... don't you know it?"

Zhang Wuji was extremely touched; grabbing her hand, he said in a tender voice, "Zhiruo, I know. What I do not know is how am I going to repay you for your great love in my lifetime. I ... I really have wronged you."

"You have not wronged me; you have always treated me very well, do you think I do not know it?" Zhou Zhiruo said. "Let me ask you this: Supposing Miss Zhao this time left you and not came back, you would not see her again forever; supposing she was killed by a wicked man, supposing she had a change of heart toward you, then you ... what would you do?"

Zhang Wuji's heart had been grieving for too long. As he

heard her say those words, he could not bear it anymore. His dam broke and with a choking voice he said, "I ... I don't know! Whatever happens; to the heavens above or to the earth below, I must find her."

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "She won't have a change of heart toward you. If you really want to find her; nothing could be easier."

Zhang Wuji was both surprised and delighted. "Where is she?" he stood up and said, "Zhiruo, tell me, quick!"

Zhou Zhiruo's pair of beautiful eyes stared at Zhang Wuji intently; seeing his face was wild with joy, she said softly, "You have never shown this kind of emotion toward me. If you want to find Miss Zhao, you must agree to do something for me. Otherwise, you can forget of finding her, ever."

"What do you want me to do?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I have not thought about it yet," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Later, when I think of it, I will let you know. I can promise you that this matter will not violate the way of chivalry; it will not hinder the great undertaking of recovering our country, and will not damage your name as well as the Ming Cult's reputation. Only, it won't necessarily be easy to do."

Zhang Wuji's expression went blank. He thought, "Min Mei has also asked me to do three things for her; she has also said that it won't violate the way of chivalry and so on, but so far, I have done only two things for her, and those two things were really not easy to manage. Why does Zhiruo have to copy her?"

"Whether you want to do it or not, it is entirely up to you," Zhou Zhiruo said, "But a real man is as good as his word. If

you agree, you simply cannot shrink back at the last moment.”

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, “You said that this matter will not violate the way of chivalry; it will not hinder the great undertaking of recovering our country, and will not damage my name as well as the Ming Cult’s reputation?”

“That’s right!” Zhou Zhiruo replied.

“Very well,” Zhang Wuji said, “If it indeed will not violate the way of chivalry and will not damage the great undertaking of recovering our country, then I give you my promise now.”

“Let’s strike our palms to seal the deal,” Zhou Zhiruo said. Extending her arm, she was ready to strike his palm.

Zhang Wuji understood that as soon as he struck her palm, he would place himself under extremely heavy shackles. Outwardly, this Miss Zhou was gentle, soft, and polite; but her mind was shrewd, her actions cruel. She was not the least bit inferior to Zhao Min. Therefore, as he raised his palm, he did not immediately strike her palm.

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “As soon as you give me your word, I am going to tell you, and you will meet your beloved very soon.”

Zhang Wuji’s chest boiled up. He no longer had any regard for anything else and struck Zhou Zhiruo’s palm three times.

Zhou Zhiruo laughed and said, “Look who’s here.” She reached down to pull and open up the bushes behind her. There it was, behind the clump of leaves sat a young woman whose face appeared smiling yet she was not exactly smiling, and who was she if not Zhao Min?

Surprised and delighted, Zhang Wuji loudly called out, “Min Mei!”

“Ah!” suddenly, from several ‘zhang’s behind him, he heard a female voice exclaimed, as if that woman could not restrain from being shocked when she saw Zhao Min appeared in the flesh. The voice was actually very soft, but Zhang Wuji was able to hear her clearly.

Zhang Wuji was staring blankly for a moment, loss in countless thoughts going through his mind. Slowly he reached out to pull Zhao Min up. When their palms met, he felt Zhao Min’s palm was rather stiff. Immediately he realized that when she left without telling anybody during the day, and then he looked for her everywhere without finding her, she was actually captured by Zhou Zhiruo. Her acupoint was sealed and she was hidden in here. Zhou Zhiruo then intentionally led him and said all those words in this place so that Zhao Min could hear him. If he could not bear to see Zhou Zhiruo sad and spoke thoughtless flattery to her, if his words were full of feeling to her, even acting passionately toward her, then he would fall into her scheme. If that happened, Zhao Min would have left without any question. As he thought about this, he could not help but groan secretly, “Shame on me!” while his back was wet with cold sweats.

Checking Zhao Min’s pulse, he found out that her ‘chi’ and blood were flowing normally, so she did not sustain any injury. Under the moonlight he saw her forehead and the corner of her eyes bore a happy expression; she looked so cute and flirtatious. He believed she heard everything he had just talked with Zhou Zhiruo. Although her body could not move and her mouth could not say anything, her ears could hear very well how he revealed the contents of his heart, that unexpectedly he loved her with engraved-in-his-heart-

carved-in-his-bones kind of love. Zhao Min could hear the earnestness in his voice and she was ecstatic beyond her own control.

Zhou Zhiruo bent her waist and whispered something in Zhang Wuji's ear. Zhang Wuji also replied in low voice. Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo shouted angrily, "Zhang Wuji, you really have no regard of me! Look carefully, after Miss Zhao is poisoned, do you think she can live?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "She ... she is poisoned?" he asked, "Did you poison her?" Stooping down to examine Zhao Min, he had just opened Zhao Min's left eye when he felt his back go numb as the acupoint on his back was sealed.

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out. His body swayed.

Zhou Zhiruo's movements were as swift as the wind. With her delicate fingers full of strength, she quickly sealed five major acupoints on his left shoulder, the side of his lower back, and the center of his back. Zhang Wuji fell backwards. He saw a dark green flash as Zhou Zhiruo drew out her sword and pointed it toward his chest.

"You cannot run, you cannot hide," she shouted sternly, "I am going to take your life today. Yin Li's ghost is entangling me anyway. I will eventually get killed. I'd rather die together with you." While saying that, she raised her sword high, ready to stab it down into Zhang Wuji's chest.

Suddenly a female voice shouted from behind her, "Hold on! Zhou Zhiruo, Yin Li has not died yet!"

Turning her head around, Zhou Zhiruo saw a woman dressed in black dash from among the thick underbrush, with fingers extended to pierce her. Zhou Zhiruo leaned sideways to

evade. The woman turned around. The moon shone its light on the side of her pretty face, albeit full of faint scars.

Zhang Wuji saw her clearly; she was none other than his cousin Yin Li, only the bumps on her face had faded. Although her face was crisscrossed with scars, the scars could not cover her beauty. She vaguely looked like the delicate and pretty young girl standing by Jin Hua Popo he met in the Butterfly Valley many years ago.

Zhou Zhiruo withdrew two steps backward, her left palm in front of her chest, the sword in her right hand was still pointing toward Zhang Wuji's chest. "You move one step forward, my sword will kill him first," she barked.

Yin Li did not dare to move, she anxiously said, "You ... have you not done enough wickedness already?"

"Are you a ghost or a human?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

"Naturally I am a human," Yin Li replied.

"Zhu'er!" suddenly Zhang Wuji cried out, sprang up and embraced Yin Li. "Zhu'er ..." he called out again, "You ... I miss you so much that it hurts!"

Yin Li shrieked as she was taken by surprise; she was unable to move because Zhang Wuji's arms were wound around her.

Zhou Zhiruo giggled and said, "If we did not do this, you won't want to come out." Turning around, she unsealed Zhao Min's acupoints and massaged her veins and muscles.

Zhao Min had been under Zhou Zhiruo's control for most of the day and was left alone after being thrown in here; she was seething with anger. Luckily, afterward she heard Zhang

Wuji pouring out his heart, which turned her anger into joy. However, Yin Li's sudden appearance had increased the countless loads she already bore in her mind. The old hatred had just gone away, new anxiety arose.

Yin Li angrily said, "What are you flattering and sweet talking to me for? Both Miss Zhao and Miss Zhou are here, watch your manners."

"Humph," Zhao Min sneered, "So he only needs to watch his manners when Miss Zhou and I are here?"

Zhang Wuji said, "I was overjoyed beyond words when I saw you arise from the dead. Biaomei, you ... how are you?"

Yin Li pulled his hand and held his face toward the moon. After staring at him for half a day, suddenly she reached out to grab his left ear and twisted it forcefully.

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out in pain, "Why did you do that?"

"You are one ugly freak deserving to be cut in thousand pieces!" Yin Li said, "You ... you buried me alive under the ground, you made me suffer countless pain." While saying that, she punched his chest three times, 'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

Zhang Wuji did not dare to protect himself with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. He endured her three punches with a smile, saying, "Zhu'er, I really thought you were ... you were dead. I cried myself to exhaustion several times. You are not dead. That is wonderful. Laotianye [lit. 'old master of the sky' - Heaven, God] truly has eyes."

"Laotianye has eyes alright, but you, this ugly freak, do not have eyes," Yin Li angrily retorted, "You did not even know whether someone died or was still alive. I just can't believe it.

You hated my swollen ugly face; you simply buried me without waiting for my breathing to stop. You don't have any conscience. You are a heartless and short-lived little rascal!"

As she constantly spitting up curses, her expression, voice and attitude were just like the Yin Li he knew. Zhang Wuji chuckled. Scratching his head, he said, "Your scolding is right on target. You are totally right. I was such a muddle-head; I saw your face was full of blood and you were not breathing, your heart was not beating. I thought you were beyond help ..."

Yin Li leaped forward to twist his right ear. Zhang Wuji chuckled and moved aside to evade. He bowed and cupped his fists. "Good Zhu'er, please forgive me!"

"I won't forgive you!" Yin Li said, "That day I woke up somehow, and felt cold all around me. Turned out I was surrounded by stones. If you wanted to bury me alive, why did you put twigs and stones on me? Why didn't you pile up dirt on me so that I could not breathe and died for real?"

"Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth that I only piled up twigs and stones on your body," Zhang Wuji said. He could not restrain from casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo.

Yin Li was angry. "This woman is completely wicked; I forbid you to look at her," she said.

"Why?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"She is the murderer who killed me," Yin Li replied, "Why do you still care about her?"

"But you are not dead," Zhao Min interrupted, "How can she

be your murderer?"

"I have died once," Yin Li said, "That makes her the murderer!"

"Good Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji tried to persuade her, "You have escaped danger and returned to live. We are all very happy. Why don't you sit nicely over here and tell us how did you cheat death and escaped alive?"

Yin Li said, "What do you mean 'we'? Let me ask you this: when you said 'we', who is 'we'?"

Zhang Wuji said with a laugh, "There are only four people in here. Naturally 'we' refers to Miss Zhou, Miss Zhao and me."

"Humph!" with a cold laugh Yin Li said, "I am not dead. Granted that you might be somewhat happy, but what about Miss Zhou and Miss Zhao? Are they also happy?"

"Miss Yin," Zhou Zhiruo said, "I was so evil in those days; I have harmed you. But later, not only I deeply regretted my actions but also I have never had peace in my sleep. Otherwise, when I suddenly saw you in the woods, I would not be frightened like this. Now that I see you alive and well, my burden has been lifted off. The Heaven above is my witness that my joy is unbounded."

Yin Li leaned her head sideways and thought for a moment. She nodded and said, "That makes sense. Actually, I was going to settle the score with you, but since you have apologized, I'll let it go."

Zhou Zhiruo kneeled down and sobbed, "I ... I truly have committed the gravest offense toward you."

Yin Li had always been hot-tempered; but seeing Zhou Zhiruo sincerely admit her guilt, her heart melted. She quickly helped her up and said, "Zhou Jiejie, let bygone be bygone, let us forget it. After all, I am not dead." Holding Zhou Zhiruo's hand, she took her to sit on her side.

Brushing her stray hair aside, Yin Li said, "You crisscrossed my face with the swords, it was also not entirely without any benefit. My face was originally bumpy, after the sword cut, the poisonous blood was drained away, the bumps slowly subsided."

Zhou Zhiruo was overwhelmed with regret; she did not know what to say.

Zhang Wuji said, "Afterwards, Yifu, Zhiruo and I lived on that island for a long time. Zhu'er, after you came out of the grave, why didn't you see us?"

"I was not willing to see you," Yin Li angrily said, "You and Miss Zhou kept whispering sweet nothings to one another; how can I not be angry listening to those crap? Humph! 'Hereafter my love to you will be doubled or tripled! We are husband and wife, two people one body; how can I mistreat you?'" In the last several sentences, she was mimicking Zhang Wuji's manner of speech. And then, she continued with Zhou Zhiruo's voice, "'What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me? Since I was little, I had never had a father and a mother to instruct me. It would be difficult not to mess up sometimes'." She coughed once and changed her voice to a throaty male voice, "'Zhiruo, you are my beloved wife. Even if you make any mistake, I won't blame you or scold you.'" Pointing her finger toward the moon on the western horizon, she said, "'The moon in the sky is our witness.'"

Turned out when Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo were pouring their hearts to each other that night, Yin Li had heard everything. As she now repeated their words one by one, Zhou Zhiruo's entire face reddened, while Zhang Wuji looked bashful and restless. He stole a glance toward Zhao Min and saw that her face was deathly pale; thus he reached out to hold her hand. To his surprise, Zhao Min turned her palm around and pricked his arm with her two long fingernails. Zhang Wuji winced from the pain, but did not dare to make any noise; he did not even dare to move.

Yin Li reached into her bosom and took out a wooden strip. She shoved it in front of Zhang Wuji's face. "Look clearly. What is this?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji looked closer and saw a line of characters engraved on the wooden strip; it read 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li. Zhang Wuji Sincerely Stated'. It was exactly the grave marker he erected in front of Yin Li's grave.

Yin Li bitterly said, "As I crawled out of the grave, I saw this wooden strip, and I was confused. What is this? Where is that heartless and short-lived little rascal Zhang Wuji? I thought about it a hundred times without figuring out what happened, until later on I eavesdropped the two of you calling 'Wuji Gege this' and 'Wuji Gege' that. It suddenly dawned on me that Zhang Wuji is Zeng Aniu, and Zheng Aniu is Zhang Wuji. You, the heartless scoundrel, you have deceived me really bad!" She raised the wooden strip and smashed it with all her might onto Zhang Wuji's head. 'Bang!' the wooden strip broke, wooden shards flew out in all directions.

Zhao Min was angry. "Why do you keep hitting people?" she said.

Yin Li laughed aloud and said, "I love to hit him, what does it have to do with you? Your heart hurts, doesn't it?"

Zhao Min blushed and said, "He is yielding to you. You do not know good from bad."

Yin Li laughed. "Why did you say I do not know good from bad?" she asked, "Don't you worry, I will not fight with you over this freak. I have given my heart to only one person, one who bit the back of my hand in the Butterfly Valley, Zhang Wuji. About this freak, I don't care if he is called Zeng Aniu or Zhang Wuji, I don't like him the least bit."

Turning toward Zhang Wuji, she said in a gentle voice, "Aniu Gege, you have always treated me very well, I am very grateful to you. But since a long time ago, I have given my heart to that heartless, ferocious little Zhang Wuji. You are not him, no, you are not him ..."

Zhang Wuji was confounded. "I am definitely Zhang Wuji," he said, "Why ... what ..."

Yin Li looked at him with a tender expression for a long, long time. Her eyes changed irregularly. Finally, she shook her head and said, "Aniu Gege, you don't understand. In the western region desert, you and I have gone through live and death situation together. On that small island, you were extremely good to me. You are a good man. But I have already told you, I have given my heart to that Zhang Wuji for a long time. I am going to find him. Tell me, do you think if I find him, he would still beat me, scold me or bite me?"

Without waiting for Zhang Wuji to answer, she turned around and slowly walked away.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji understood. Turned out the one she truly loved was the Zhang Wuji who lived in her memory, the Zhang Wuji she met in the Butterfly Valley, the one who beat her and bite her, the obstinate Zhang Wuji who refused to follow her; not the real Zhang Wuji, the grown up Zhang Wuji who was extremely tolerant and always treated people with kindness. One third part of his heart was wounded, one third of it was reluctant to let her go, yet the other third part was relieved. He followed her with his gaze until her shadow disappeared into the darkness. He knew that for the rest of her life, Yin Li would always remember the very strong teenage boy of the Butterfly Valley, and that she would always want to find him. He realized that she would never find the one she was looking for, but then again, he could say that she had already found him, because that boy had always lived in her heart. Isn't it true that oftentimes, the real person, the actual matter, is not as good as the one inside one's memory?

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "It's all my fault. I harmed her so bad that she turns crazy."

Yet Zhang Wuji thought, "She might be a little confused, and that was because of me. But compared to a clear-minded person, she is not necessarily less happy."

Zhao Min, however, had another matter in her mind. Yin Li had gone, but what about Zhou Zhiruo? Yin Li had not died, Xie Xun had been found, safe and well, the martial art manual concealed inside the Yitian Sword, as well as the military strategy manual inside the Tulong Saber, along with the Saber itself, had been recovered and returned to Zhang Wuji. In short, it appeared that Zhou Zhiruo's offenses and mistakes had not turned to the worst. While it was true that Song Qingshu had killed Mo Shenggu because of her, but it was Song Qingshu's own crime; Zhou Zhiruo actually did not

have any foreknowledge of the matter, also, she certainly did not instigate the incident. Zhang Wuji had had an engagement with her before, and he was not the kind of man who would abandon trust and uprightness.

Zhou Zhiruo stood up. "Let's go!" she said.

"Where?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "When I was at the Shaolin Temple just now, I saw monk Peng Yingyu came in a hurry to look for him," she gestured toward Zhang Wuji. "Apparently, there is some important matter within the Ming Cult."

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "I must not neglect important Cult business for the sake of my feelings toward women," he mused, and then hastily said, "Let us quickly find out what happened."

They set off at once, and after walking quickly for a short while, they arrived at the Ming Cult's encampments. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Peng Yingyu, and the others were just about to dispatch their subordinates to look for their Cult Leader. Everybody expressed their delight and relief to see him come back, but when they saw Zhou and Zhao, two women returning with him, their faces all showed surprised looks.

Zhang Wuji noticed that everybody looked dejected, immediately he knew something was amiss. "Peng Dashi," he asked, "Were you looking for me?"

Before Peng Yingyu even answered, Zhou Zhiruo dragged Zhao Min away by the hand while saying, "Let us go and sit over there."

Zhao Min understood Zhou Zhiruo was trying to avoid any

suspicion; she was not willing to listen to the Ming Cult discussing their internal affairs. Thereupon Zhao Min accompanied her going out the room. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao and the others were even more amazed. They all thought, "In Jiaozhu's wedding day in Haozhou that day, these two young ladies fought ferociously one against the other; but now they look as close as sisters. I wonder how Jiaozhu reconciled them. He is indeed able to achieve the impossible. The 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi' skill truly deserves other people's admiration."

Peng Yingyu waited until Zhou and Zhao, two women left before saying, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: We suffered a major defeat in Haozhou; Han Shantong, Han Xiong has fallen."

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried. He was deeply grieved.

Peng Yingyu continued, "Presently, the military affair around the Huai Si River is under Zhu Yuanzhang Xiongdi's control. As soon as Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, two brothers learned about the news, they deployed their troops to render their assistance. Han Lin'er Xiongdi is also coming with them. The situation is urgent; we did not wait for Jiaozhu's order."

"That's how it should be done," Zhang Wuji replied. While they were in the middle of discussing military situation, Yin Yewang rushed in and said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: The Beggar Clan is sending their people to inform us that Chen Youliang, that traitor's whereabouts has been discovered."

"Where is he?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Yin Yewang said, "Unexpectedly, that traitor mingles in the midst of our Cult as a subordinate of Xu Shouhui Xiongdi. I heard he has won Xu Shouhui Xiongdi's favor and trust."

Zhang Wuji pondered for a moment and said, "If that's the case, it is inappropriate for us to act rashly. Jiujiu [maternal uncle], I must bother you to send someone to warn Xu Xiong: this traitor Chen Youliang is extremely treacherous and crafty. By letting him staying by his side, Xu Xiong is just waiting for a great disaster to happen; he must by all means not let Chen Youliang stay close to him."

Yin Yewang complied, but then he continued, "It would be better to eliminate him completely with a blade. Please assign me to handle him!"

Zhang Wuji was still contemplating the proposal when a Ming Cult disciple came in to deliver an urgent letter from Xu Shouhui.

Yang Xiao knitted his brows and exclaimed, "Terrible! It's terrible! He has beaten us by taking the initiative."

Zhang Wuji unsealed the letter and read. Turned out it was a long report Xu Shouhui submitted to his superior. In it he explained how Chen Youliang admitted his offense to the Cult Leader, how he understood that he had committed a serious crime, how he deeply regretted his sins and wanted to repent. Right now he sincerely wanted to join the Ming Cult and was determined to completely turn from his wicked ways. He was asking the Cult Leader to give him an opportunity to tread the new way.

Zhang Wuji handed the letter over to Yang Xiao, Yin Yewang and the others so that they could read it themselves. Yin Yewang said, "Xu Xiongdi has fallen under this man's spell; he will certainly suffer misfortune in the future."

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This traitor Chen Youliang is

extremely wicked, but if we kill him at this moment, the public is bound to find out. It would appear that we are only settling a long-standing grudge without giving any consideration to other people's qualities. We will inevitably turn the hearts of the world's heroes cold."

"What Yang Zuo Shi said is correct," Zhang Wuji said, "Peng Dashi, you are a good friend of Xu Xiong. Why don't you advise him to be careful and rise up his guard against Chen Youliang? He must not let the authority over the troops to fall into his hand." Peng Yingyu gave him his consent.

Unfortunately, Xu Shouhui dismissed Peng Yingyu's advice. Chen Youliang had won his full confidence and in the end he lost his life under Chen Youliang's hands. Afterwards, Chen Youliang seized control of Ming Cult's western rebel army. He declared himself 'Han Wang' [King of Han], and fought for control over the land under the heavens [i.e. China] against the eastern Ming Cult rebel army. They fought great battles as far as Lake Poyang, until finally his troops were defeated and he lost his life in battle. During the dozens of year's fierce civil war, the heroes and warriors of the Ming Cult suffered very heavy casualties.

That very evening, Zhang Wuji had a discussion with Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others. They agreed to dispatch Ming Cult disciples to various army units to coordinate their movements. By the time they finished their meeting, it was already very late at night.

Early next morning, Zhao Min said, "Zhou Jiejie left last night. She said she did not wait to take her leave from you."

Zhang Wuji was depressed for half a day. Then he remembered that the number of days he had been separated from Zhang Sanfeng was simply too great and he missed

him. Therefore, taking Zhao Min and Song Qingshu along, he decided to come to Mount Wudang with Yu Lianzhou and the others.

The distance between Shaoshi Peak and Mount Wudang was not too far; in just a few days they have reached the mountain. Zhang Wuji accompanied Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi and Yin Liting as they entered the inside hall to pay their respects to Zhang Sanfeng, also to see Song Yuanqiao and Yu Daiyan.

When Song Yuanqiao learned that his son was outside, his face paled; with a sword in his hand, he stormed outside. Zhang Wuji and the others were in quandary; they felt they must persuade him, yet they realized it was not their place to interfere. Left with no other choice, they went to the main hall in his wake. Zhang Sanfeng also followed them out.

“Where is that disobedient, rebelling animal?” Song Yuanqiao roared. His glance caught Song Qingshu, who was still lying down on the stretcher. Song Qingshu’s head was covered in plain wrap cloth, even his eyes were covered. The sword in Song Yuanqiao’s hand was aimed straight at Song Qingshu’s body, but Song Yuanqiao’s hand went weak and the sword did not continue piercing down. In that instant, he remembered the love between a father and his son, the loyalty among disciples of the same school; all sorts of feeling welled up in his heart. Turning the sword around, he stabbed it into his own lower abdomen.

Zhang Wuji hastily reached out to snatch the sword away, while urging, “Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle], you must not do this. Let us leave it to Tai Shifu [grandmaster] to handle this matter properly.”

Zhang Sanfeng sighed and said, “That our Wudang School

has produced this kind of unfilial disciple, Yuanqiao, it is not the misfortune of you, one man, alone. It is better for us all not to have this kind of unfilial son!" His right hand waved and 'Bang!' it landed on Song Qingshu's chest. Song Qingshu's internal organs shattered and he stopped breathing instantly.

Song Yuanqiao knelt down and sobbed, "Shifu, disciple was negligent in teaching disciple, resulting in Qi Di's [seventh (younger) brother] life lost in that animal's hands. How can disciple be worthy of you, Senior, and Qi Di?"

Zhang Sanfeng reached down to help him up, saying, "You do have some part in this transgression. Lianzhou will take over the Zhang Men disciple position from you starting today. You may devote your attention to study and refine the Taiji Fist technique. The day-to-day affair of Zhang Men, you do not need to manage anymore."

Song Yuanqiao bowed to thank him and receive the order. Yu Lianzhou tried to decline, but Zhang Sanfeng firmly refused to dismiss him, thereupon he had to accept the order.

Witnessing how Zhang Sanfeng executed Song Qingshu, removed Song Yuanqiao from his position, and thus managing his school with a firm hand, there was not anyone present who did not shiver with astonishment.

Zhang Sanfeng asked about the Great Assembly of Heroes and the rebel army's fight against the Yuan, he was very warm toward Zhang Wuji. Zhao Min knelt and kowtowed in front of Zhang Sanfeng, asking forgiveness of her previous rudeness and offenses. Zhang Sanfeng laughed and said that he had never kept it in his heart. While it was true that Yu Daiyan's lifelong disability, Zhang Cuishan's lost of life, were related to her subordinate, Ah Da, Ah Er, and the others, Zhao Min had not even been born yet at that time, so when

all is said and done, he could not put the blame on her.

When Zhang Sanfeng heard that she willingly forsook her father and brother to follow Zhang Wuji, he said, "Very good! Very good! A woman like you is hard to come by!"

After several days of good visit with Zhang Sanfeng and the others at the Wudang Mountain, Zhang Wuji proceeded toward Haozhou accompanied by Zhao Min. Along the way he repeatedly heard reports of their Cult's victories. He also heard that the rebel army had swarmed various places; Zhang Shicheng at Gusu and Fang Guozhen at Taizhou, for instance. Although they were not affiliated with the Ming Cult, they were friendly forces who fought the Yuan together. Zhang Wuji's heart was overjoyed; he continued riding with Zhao Min toward the east, envisioning that the days until country's [orig. 'he shan'] recovery were close. He only hoped that henceforth peace and security would reign over the world, the common people would enjoy a good and prosperous life. If that happened, then the hovering between live and dead, the undergoing of many sufferings in the past several years would not be in vain.

Zhang Wuji was not willing to create too much disturbance, hence, along the way he avoided meeting the Ming Cult rebel army's officers and generals. He simply observed them in secret and was pleased to find the rebel army's troops were following strict discipline; they did not harass the common people and everywhere he heard praises to Marshal Zhu Yuanzhang and Senior General Xu Da.

One day he arrived at the outskirts of Haozhou. Zhu Yuanzhang had heard about his arrival and sent Tang He and Deng Yu, two generals to lead troops waiting to welcome him and take him to the guesthouse. Tang He reported, "Marshal Zhu, along with Senior General Xu Da and General Chang are

in the middle of urgent military intelligence meeting. They cannot contain their delight as they learned about Jiaozhu's arrival; only they are being bound by military affairs and are not able to welcome Jiaozhu personally. For this disrespectful offense, they are asking Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "We are all brothers, why bother with all these empty talks about welcoming and sending off? Military intelligence matter is more important."

That evening, a large banquet was prepared in the guesthouse. Tang He and Deng Yu, two generals acted as hosts. After three rounds of wine, Zhu Yuanzhang, accompanied by his senior generals, hurriedly rushed in and bowed to the ground in front of the banquet table. Zhang Wuji hastily helped him up. Zhu Yuanzhang personally poured some wine and respectfully presented three cups of wine to Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji took the cups and dried them up in one gulp. Zhu Yuanzhang also presented some wine to honor Zhao Min, and Zhao Min drank it.

During the banquet, they talked about the military situation in various fronts. When talking about their achievements in besieging towns and seizing territories, Zhu Yuanzhang looked rather proud of himself. Zhang Wuji heaped him with praises.

While they were still taking, suddenly the Senior General Liao Yongzhong entered the reception hall in big strides. After paying his respects to their Cult Leader, he whispered in Zhu Yuanzhang's ear, "He is captured!"
"Very good!" Zhu Yuanzhang replied.

Suddenly, from outside the door someone was shouting loudly, "Injustice! Injustice!"

Zhang Wuji recognized the voice crying 'injustice' was Han Lin'er's. "Is that Han Xiongdi?" he was astonished, "What happened?"

Zhu Yuanzhang said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: This traitor Han Lin'er is conspiring with the Tatars, he is scheming to topple our Cult by responding from the inside to their attack from outside."

Zhang Wuji was even more shocked, "Han Xiongdi is a very loyal and upright person, how can this happen? Take him in quickly, let me ask him personally ..." His words were not finished when he suddenly felt dizzy; the sky became fuzzy and the earth blackened as he lost consciousness.

When he came around, he felt his limbs were bound with rough and heavy ropes. Looking around him, all he could see was darkness. His shock was not exactly 'mild'. Fortunately, he felt a soft body leaning against his chest. Turned out Zhao Min and he were bound together, only Zhao Min had not regained consciousness yet.

Upon thinking it over, Zhang Wuji realized that Zhu Yuanzhang was behind all this. Most likely he expected the Ming Cult to be successful in the future; then logically and rightfully, Zhang Wuji should become the new emperor. Therefore, he put an extremely strong drug in Zhang Wuji's wine with the intention of killing him secretly later.

Zhang Wuji circulated his 'chi' around once, and did not find anything unusual in his chest and abdomen; his strength was still intact. He sneered inwardly and thought, "So they think they can bind me with this rope? I don't think it's that easy. Right now Min Mei has not awakened yet; there's no hurry in leaving. As soon as it is dawn, I am going to expose his traitorous scheme in front of our Cult's people." Thereupon

he rested quietly to regain his strength.

About two hours later, he suddenly heard some people enter the room next door. As he listened to them talking, he recognized the voices of Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, three people.

He heard that Zhu Yuanzhang was saying, "This man betrays our Cult, surrenders to the Yuan Dynasty. The evidence is conclusive; there is no doubt about it. It pained me just to think about it. Brothers, what do you think we must do?" Without waiting for Xu Da and Chang Yuchun to answer, he continued, "This man's ears and eyes are numerous; he has trusted comrades everywhere in the army. We'd better not to mention his name."

Xu Da was heard replying, "Zhu Dage [big brother Zhu], to succeed in an important matter, we must not concern ourselves with trivial matters; we must cut the grass and pull the roots, do not leave any potential problem in the future."

"But this little thief has always been our superior," Zhu Yuanzhang said, "We must not forget kindness and violate justice. This is our basic principle."

Chang Yuchun said, "If Dage is afraid that by killing him the army would revolt, there is no harm in us making our move quietly, so that Dage's reputation will not be implicated."

Zhu Yuanzhang was quiet for a moment before saying, "Since Xu and Chang, two brothers have already said so, we will deal with him as such, then. Only, this little thief has sown quite some kindness to the people of our Cult, also, two brothers were usually on good terms with him; we must keep this matter from leaking out. Ay, the thought of killing him today is truly unbearable for me."

Xu and Chang both said, "We cannot give friends and personal relations more consideration than the great undertaking of recovering the nation." As the three men finished talking, they went out the room.

Zhang Wuji sucked a mouthful of cold air. Immediately he exerted his 'shen gong' [divine power/strength] to break the rope binding his body. Carrying Zhao Min in his arms, he quietly climbed over the wall and went out.

Leaning against the wall, he could not stop all sorts of feelings from bubbling up in his heart. "That traitor Zhu Yuanzhang forgets kindness and violates justice, I am fine with it. But Xu Dage and Chang Dage have special friendship with me, yet for the sake of riches and honor they are unexpectedly able to betray me. The three of them bear heavy responsibility within the rebel army. If I strike them dead with my palm, I am afraid the army's unity would disintegrate. I, Zhang Wuji, have never coveted name or position. Xu Dage, Chang Dage, you are looking down on me too much." After thinking deeply for half a day, he quietly took Zhao Min to leave the area.

When he was safe outside the city, he wrote a letter, appointing Yang Xiao as the new Cult Leader, but he did not write even a single character about what had happened in Haozhou.

It never occurred to Zhang Wuji that when Xu Da and Chang Yuchun talked about 'the little thief', they were actually referring to Han Lin'er. They did not even know that Zhang Wuji was in Haozhou. Everything was secretly arranged by Zhu Yuanzhang. He wanted to make Zhang Wuji downhearted so that Zhang Wuji would retire voluntarily. First, Zhu Yuanzhang was dreadful of Zhang Wuji's divine

bravery. Second, Zhang Wuji was their Cult's Jiaozhu who was highly esteemed by everybody in their Cult. Let's say he wanted to kill him; not only Zhu Yuanzhang did not have the courage to do so, even if he did succeed in killing him, but if there was the slightest chance of his plot being exposed, the consequences would be too detrimental for him.

Zhu Yuanzhang understood very well that Zhang Wuji placed the important matter of recovering the country above all else, moreover, he loved Xu Da and Chang Yuchun like brothers. As soon as Zhang Wuji heard their discussion, he would quietly go away.

As expected, everything happened according to Zhu Yuanzhang's anticipation. Although Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was unequalled in the present age, in term of scheming and resourcefulness, he was too far below Zhu Yuanzhang. In the end, he had fallen into the treacherous scheme of the most ambitious and ruthless character of their generation.

Although Zhang Wuji had never wanted to be an emperor, he would feel saddened for the rest of his life whenever Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, which he thought were without kindness and loyalty, came into his mind.

As for the accusation that Han Lin'er was colluding with the Tatars and betraying his country, it was actually Zhu Yuanzhang who planted false evidence against him. It was because after Han Shantong's death, the army appointed Han Lin'er as their commander; consequently, Zhu, Xu, Chang, and the other generals became his subordinates.

Zhu Yuanzhang forged a letter from Han Lin'er to the enemy as if it was Han Lin'er's own handwriting; with a large sum of money, he also bribed Han Lin'er's trusted aide to leak the secret to Xu Da and Chang Yuchun. Xu and Chang, two men,

believed without any reservation. As a result, they insisted on Han Lin'er's elimination. Zhu Yuanzhang pretended to uphold righteousness and benevolence by refusing to allow the execution. It was not until Xu Da and Chang Yuchun urged him repeatedly that he reluctantly agreed.

He held Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min in the adjacent room, knowing that with his martial art skill, for Zhang Wuji to break the rope binding his body was as easy as lifting his finger. He was only afraid that as soon as Zhang Wuji was free, he would find him to exact revenge. Therefore, as soon as he finished talking with Xu and Chang, two men, he immediately went into hiding.

Soon after Zhang Wuji left, he ordered Liao Yongzhong to throw Han Lin'er into the river and let him sink into the bottom. This way, he killed two birds with one stone. His plan was truly flawless.

Later, Yang Xiao became the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult; but by this time Zhu Yuanzhang had grown wings, the troops under his command numbered in millions. Yang Xiao was aging and less ambitious than before, he lost any desire to fight over the throne with him.

After Zhu Yuanzhang ascended the throne, he opposed the Ming Cult by issuing an order to strictly prohibit its movement and massacred the brethrens who had once rendered great merit to him. Chang Yuchun died early because of sickness. Xu Da eventually was not able to escape disaster.

When Zhang Wuji finished writing the letter to Yang Xiao, Zhao Min saw he did not immediately put down the writing brush in his hand; he had quite an unhappy expression on his face. Zhao Min interrupted his thoughts by saying, "Wuji Gege, once you agreed to do three things for me. The first

thing was to let me look at the Tulong Saber; the second thing was not to marry Zhou Jiejie back at Haozhou, so the first two matters are already accomplished. I still have the third request to you, you must not fail to keep your own word."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "You ... you ..." he stammered, "What kind of strange demonic witchcraft do you want me to do this time ...?"

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, "My eyebrows are too thin. I want you to thicken it with your brush. This matter certainly does not violate the Wulin's way of chivalry, does it?"

Zhang Wuji raised his brush up; he laughed and said, "From now on I am going to draw your eyebrows every day."

Suddenly from outside the window came a soft giggle and someone said, "Wuji Gege, you also promised to do something for me." It was Zhou Zhiruo's voice.

Zhang Wuji was so engrossed in writing the letter that he did not know when she arrived outside the window. The shutters slowly opened and Zhou Zhiruo's beautiful face appeared. Under the candlelight, she looked smiling, yet she was not exactly smiling.

Zhang Wuji was startled again. "You ... what do you want me to do?" he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, "I haven't thought about it now, but when you and Zhao Jia Meizi [little sister of Zhao family] are ready to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, I am sure I will think of something by then."

Zhang Wuji turned to look at Zhao Min, and then he turned

again to look at Zhou Zhiruo. In that instant, a myriad of thoughts raced around in his mind. He was unsure if he should be happy or if he should be worried. His hand trembled and the brush fell on the table ...

THE END